



Flaring Passions Behind Hospital Doors 25

WARD 20

James Warner Bellah

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Chicago DAILY NEWS

Complete and
unabridged



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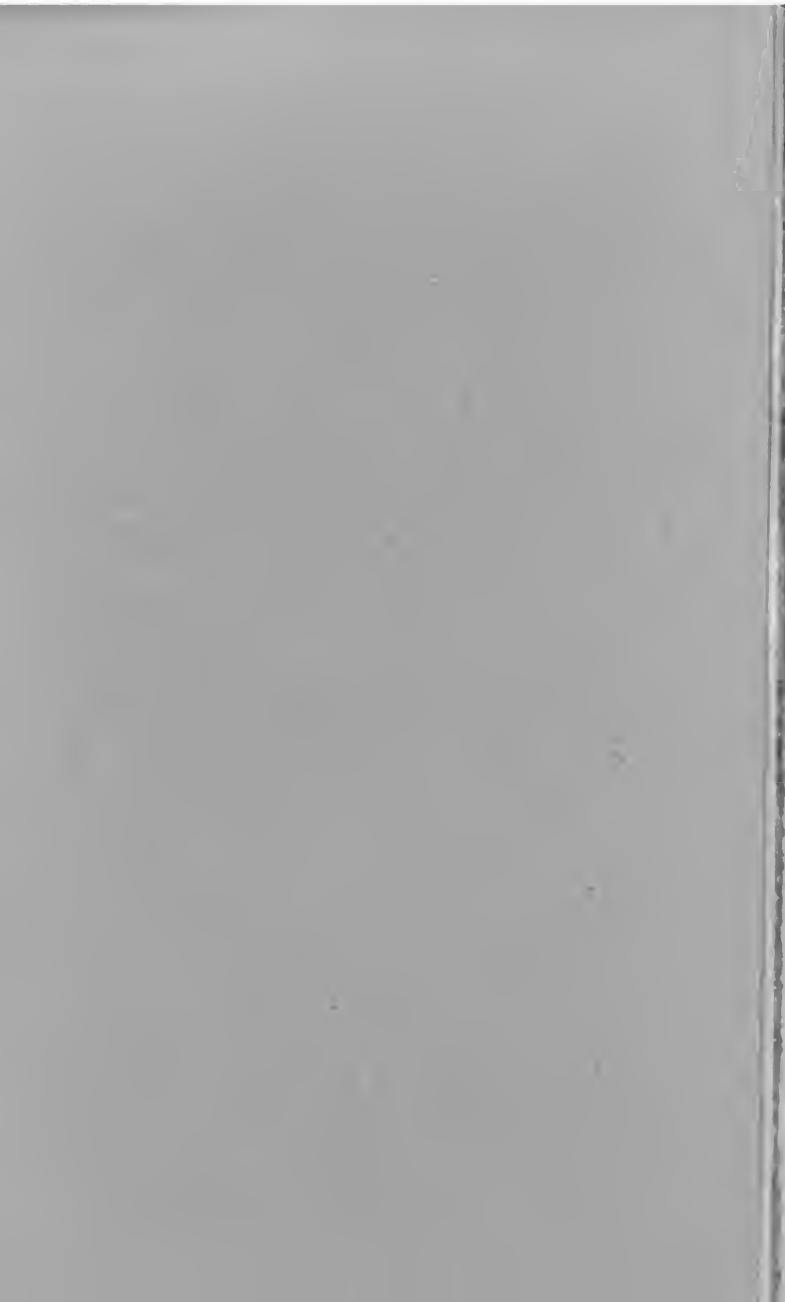
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A. Q. Maisel

SATURDAY REVIEW

FROM THE REVIEWS

"This is a shocker. Most people will be shocked by the language; most people should be shocked by the facts."

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A Realistic Novel

WARD 20

James Warner Bellah

**A POPULAR LIBRARY EAGLE BOOK
NEW YORK**

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FOREWORD

Ward Twenty is Ward Twenty in any military general hospital near any large city in the United States. Names are merely distinguishing labels on human beings.

Molton Halpern, Pasquale Cancellare, Jaxon, Tony Schiappas, Joe Keenan, Terrible Ivan Paskow, Charlie Whitehead, Bill Meredith, Daley, Ralph Meneilley, Benny Frischling, Atkinson, and Stroup are any soldiers anywhere, wounded or not.

Eulalia Keiffer, Pat Mahon, Lovely Fairbanks, Miss Phipps, Margaret Charbonneau, Krientz, Little Fitchett and "Falstaff" Crossley are any nurses anywhere.

Major Stephano, Captain Broadbent, Captain Desbro and Lieutenant McIntyre are any physicians and surgeons—anywhere.

Sally Welland, Gretchen, Anna, Hildegard, Father Sheehy, Treadmore Basset, General Cranston, General Mercato, Strahan, Kountze, Pillsbury, Grogan, Dorothy Rosso, Janet Kovacs, Rose Rapelye, Gerry Barnes, Ralphie Meneilley, Clara Jaxon, Geraldine Meneilley, Cissie Hantz are any WACS, Therapists, Priests, Ambassadors, General Officers, Orderlies, Whores, Girlfriends, Babies or Wives—anywhere.

Apthorpe, Cartwright, Bascomb, Delamater, Heinze, Philips, Unknown, Krantz, Unknown, Kyles, McKeldin, Scirianich, Apel, Sigel, S/Sgt. Shapiro, Ryder, Bowerman, O'Hare, Zimmerman, 2/Lt. Manoel Estados, Tesnick, Kriemanski, Morgan—are any dead American soldiers

lying anywhere the world around under white crosses in the moonlight.

Any similarity these names may have to the names of any persons living or dead, in or out of any Ward Twenty or anywhere else, is purely coincidental.

WARD TWENTY

It was still dark when Miss Mahon came into the Ward with the early medicine tray. Warm with the sleep of men and quiet, freshening with the first early air of morning that breathed through the screened windows and stirred bed curtains, rattling the rings of one of them faintly against its chromium bar.

They slept, Ward Twenty, dark heads and very young in sleep against the white pillows and white blankets. Relaxed, gone somewhere into an oblivion that took the present from them and cast them back across the months that were gone. They had slept the night far enough down to have dreamed themselves out of the places they had come from—to be back now in the places they had known long before. Lone wind on the high Sierras and the raucous streets of Brooklyn, the dusty roads of the Cumberland and the lazy Georgia sunshine. A hound dog's voice across the flatness of Illinois and the spaced bark of a dory engine off San Diego.

Halpern, Cancellare, and Jaxon. Schiappas, Keenan, Paskow, and Whitehead. Meredith, Daley, Meneilley, and Frischling. Numbers turned back into names.

Patricia Mahon was young with the intangible feeling of girlhood still with her. Her eyes were large and when you looked straight at her, you knew that she should be beautiful, but that she wasn't. Her large eyes and her hair did that, but her chin and her nose in profile stole her beauty from her with quick malice and left her face marked with a thousand years of the simmering race pots of Connemara.

She touched Joe Keenan's shoulder. He awakened at once, rigid—listening for firing, twisting his mind like the key of a C-ration can to remember compass directions, groping to remember at once where the company commander was sleeping. He breathed the warm woman smell of her and snaked an arm out quickly and caught her thighs to the bed. "Mahon," he whispered, "you've got lovely legs."

"Stop, Joe—you'll spill this."

"What for, Mahon? You've proved your point. You've kept it this long. You don't want to spoil it, do you? You sure as hell will if you don't watch out."

"Let go of me, Joe—stop!"

He grinned and let her go and took the belladonna and drank it.

Her face was hot in the darkness while anger and a strange febrile weakness fought in her throat and her knees for her, neither quite gaining control.

Keenan, still smiling, took the sheet and blanket in both hands on either side of his neck and drew them taut to his chin in sleepy sensuousness. For a moment he was a boy again in his soft quilted bed at home, stretching his legs against the linen sheets, yawning to the navel. He could feel the strong thrust of his feet and legs, far down in the bed—and then the present washed back into his mind like waters through a buckling dyke. But he had a mind, so he stopped them, dammed them off—and lazily went back to sleep.

Mahon put her left hand on Halpern's forehead. He didn't move, but he said "Yes?" sharply from his darkness, as if he never slept in it but lay there always on sentry duty, ready to challenge anyone who approached.

"Medicine, Milton."

"Is iss it, den?"

"Sit up, Milton." She put a hand under his shoulders and raised him and held the tiny glass to his lips. He drank in utter physical resignation, but his bitter mind still rebelled. "Ain't got t' guts—none of ya. Ain't got t' common decency to a dawg."

Schiappas woke up in the next bed.

"Little ray of sunshine hasn't got psychology yet! Ya gonna go to Ward Thoiteen?"

"Nuts."

"Ya got th' meat in ya skull, ain't ya? Ya gonna let that go, too, ya dope—ya gonna use it?"

"Nuts."

"I ain't gonna let ya go, Halpern," Schiappas said. "So ya just as well relax on account I gotta long ways ta go wit ya."

Miss Mahon stopped by Whitehead's bed. It was getting light now. Morning stood gray against the windows and the bulb in the passageway was suddenly harsh and useless.

"Feel it," Whitehead said. "It feels burning."

She put her left hand to his leg in the traction splint.

"You don't have to lie," he said.

"Now don't get started on that, Charlie. The doctor will be in soon."

"If I have to go to the Butcher Shop, I want to know all about it. I have a right to know all about it, haven't I? I'm different." Whitehead's voice was soft. "All these other Joes have been there. I haven't. All I've done is train, train, march, march, maneuver, maneuver. It isn't fair. I wanted to go over——"

Paskow woke up. "O.K., Charlie—don't let it eat you. A foot's a foot just the same. It's all one war, see?"

"It isn't the same," Charlie said. "What can I talk about after? Not even a Purple Heart."

"Joes don't talk about Purple Hearts."

"No, I know. But they wear them."

Paskow snorted. "The trick is to have enough left to wear one on, Kid. Look at me. I just about squeezed the place in and nothing left over," and he laughed. "Take it easy, Charlie. Twenty years from now, who'll care?"

"I will." Whitehead turned his face away and closed his eyes against the warm tears.

Miss Mahon went on to Cancellare. It was light enough now to switch off the passage lights. She hated this hour

when they all came back into the present. Hated all of it but Joe Keenan. Joe Keenan lived deep inside her, drained her of determination and left her weak. But she could afford the pleasant danger of him, play with it just a tiny bit, because he couldn't chase her and wrap his arms about her and hold her breathless and helpless and weak. She could always get away from Joe Keenan—run at the last minute and he couldn't follow her. Then, when she had strength and determination within her again, she could go back to him and face the danger again.

Cancellare dropped his pillow to the floor, rolled over and let himself down out of bed until he was resting on the pillow. Then he prayed, his mind racing off eagerly and penitently to his very personal saints who led him gently to the outer portals of his God. And there he talked simply and earnestly in his mind with very ponderous words he didn't quite know the meaning of. But he knew his God heard him and made notes about Pasquale Cancellare who all of his life had approached his God upon his knees and now approached him even lower—humbly and gratefully—because his God had walked beside him all of the way the war had taken him, holding his hand, speaking into his ear. "Pasquale Cancellare, I am with you. Fear not. My hand is in yours. I have been wounded, too."

Miss Mahon helped him back into bed. "You are a good church boy, Cancellare."

"Will the Call some day come?" he whispered.

"It does to some. I don't know how it comes—but it does."

"And I will hear it? It will be plain? I cannot make a mistake on this. I must know for sure."

"You must talk to Father Sheehy."

"I know," he nodded. "But it would be so wonderful I cannot think of it because I am afraid it is the glory of it that leads me on—the vestments, the music, the being there at the altar—that maybe confuses me and does

not tell me truly what is in my heart. Whether I am good enough within."

Jaxon opened his eyes and lay very still, watching and listening, his long, Texas face relaxed on the pillow. Then he remembered and a delicious, sick hunger gnawed in his bowels and raced outward into the nerve nets of his arms and wrists. His face was pale under the tan that still clung to him yellowly like the stain of atabrine. His even teeth were bleached bone white, for he had never smoked in all his forty years.

"Hello, Texas," Miss Mahon said.

"She comes today," he said. "My Missus."

"Oh, that's nice."

Jaxon closed his washed blue eyes. "I guess you wouldn't think she's pretty. Too much sun maybe and hard work and not much of a hand for fixin' up. But she always seems pretty to me. Always has. Funny, ain't it? Woman's got poison, like a snake. Gets into a man and there it stays. Good women, that is. Let her get her poison in and she's always pretty to the man it strikes."

Miss Mahon smiled. "A girl likes to hope so."

"It's gospel," Jaxon said. "I know."

Meneilley woke up. He had heard all that Jaxon said, half in sleeping, half in waking. It turned sour in his mind as his mouth was sour. He wanted to spit, but he couldn't, so he just lay there in the sourness of it. "Some people can sure kid themselves," he said.

"You start beating your choppers," Jaxon told him, "and I'll slug you. You heard me."

"Takes all kind of damn fools to make a world, Bub. I ain't saying you're one. Maybe you're lucky. Somebody's got to be once in a while to even off. Me—I ain't. That's all. I make you sick. You make me sick. There's still the weather. Mahon, what's it like, raining?"

"No—it's going to be a good day."

Bill Meredith, next to Meneilley, opened his eyes.

"Pills, pills, always pills," Meredith said. "You got a pill grows hands on fast? Sure as hell growing," he said,

"but too slow. Got to grow faster, Mahon—I'm overdue for crap shooting. Mahon—when did you first go wrong?"

"Don't talk to the nurse like that," Jaxon growled.

"O.K. O.K., Sir Whoosis. So she's an angel of mercy. Pure like snow. I love her. Marry me, Mahon. Jaxon, you're a pure-minded picklepuss. You depress me before breakfast. I'm happy. I'm going to talk to Daley. Daley—wake up. It's reveille. You're getting paid, ain't you? Wake up and sit reveille. You're getting like a lieutenant the way you sleep."

"Shet up," Daley grunted. "A smart apple. For me, I like sleep."

"That's the lieutenant of it."

"Meredith," Meneilley said, "you'll get so cheerful someday you'll blow your top in the early morning. Mahon—move him over beside Halpern, maybe they'll level each other off. One up. One down."

Daley felt wonderful, wonderful all over. Ever since he was hit, it had been like this—belonging. A part of it. In the club. Before—it was awful. Ever since he had been a kid it was awful. Nobody ever chose him for a side. Nobody ever paid any attention to him. Thin and scrawny with a pink-cheeked face that just waited and waited and hoped. They made fun of him—dirty fun sometimes. At Fort Meade they made fun of him—at Camp Forrest at Indiantown. They hooked his stuff, borrowed money and never paid it back, gave him the dirty jobs. Even in the LST that morning they were still kidding him about a sixty-four-dollar laundry bill. "Scrape out your pants, Daley, and get going." Always they aimed that stuff at him, wherever he went all his life. But no more. All in one second it changed. One roaring second of white light and screams and no feeling below his knees. "My name's Daley. What's yours, chum? I got hit on Omaha Easy Red. Geez, the big bathing party? I'll say. Joe—friend of mine, Daley. A good guy. Howya?"

Daley snuggled against himself in the warmth of his bed, shivering inside with the comfort of belonging.

"Meredith," he said, "I like you. Go ahead, be happy, all you want."

"You're a good kid," Meredith told him. "Light me up." Daley flipped over and reached for his cigarettes on the steel bed table, lit one, and pushed a long, thin arm across to Meredith's bed, putting the cigarette between Meredith's lips. Meredith sucked the smoke deep into his lungs and exhaled. Daley held the butt up while the full kick hit Meredith, then he gave him another drag the same way and another, until the cigarette was down to a nub. Then he snubbed it out.

"You're a good guy," Meredith said.

Frischling rolled over. "Does my God-damned sleeping keep you two bastards awake?"

"It's noon," Meredith said.

"So it's noon. So what day is it noon in?"

"So wake up."

"So shut up," Frischling said. "So catch something and get moved to the pest house."

"Frischling—you going to starve to death sleeping someday. I'm worried," Meredith said. "Go ahead, slug Daley, he does my fighting for me. Slug Daley, I'm telling you, you don't dare."

Frischling sat up. "Could I say 'please' to you two noisy bastards and get results? No. No breeding. No family background. No sensibilities. I'm surprised a self-respecting Kraut would fight you two. So good morning, I'm awake."

Daley laughed.

Meredith thrust himself up with his stomach muscles. "Frischling, I gotta go. You match Daley to see who and the other comes for chaperone. O.K. Let's go."

As Miss Mahon passed Joe Keenan's bed on her way out to the office she saw that he was sleeping quietly again, his face turned sideways on the pillow. He was good-looking, Joe. With tight black hair, curled to his even-planed head. A straight-backed head and a straight nose and full lips, with the dark shadow of a strong beard dusting his cheeks. He'd been a something—before. A

fast worker, a laugher, a smooth throaty talker—and kind when he had to be kind. He knew all the answers, Joe. “Mahon—you’re a virgin. Don’t blush. What are you ashamed of? You’d think it was wrong to be a virgin. You don’t, do you? Besides—you can always stop, Mahon.”

Miss Mahon felt the blood in her neck and cheeks again. She went hurriedly up the passage to the office and turned over the keys to Eulalia Keiffer who stood there yawning and staring out of the window. “Honest to God, Mahon,” Keiffer said, “since the Army took us out of white and put us in seersucker, I don’t feel like a nurse. I feel like a scrubwoman. In the morning, before, you were always cool and pressed and starched. And you could wake up. Now—I just slop.”

“No breakfast for little Whitehead.”

Miss Keiffer turned around. “I’m so sorry. That kid fought hard.”

Grogan, the wardmaster, came in, smoking a bitter cigarette. Its thin, oily tang fouled the air of the office. “Morning, Lootenants.”

A cheerful soul, Grogan, and a beggar for details. Give him a list of details, put him on a one-way track and start him off and he never missed. Once every month he got stinking for two days. But he was the best wardmaster in the hospital. Because he looked just like a wardmaster and not the least bit like a soldier, soldiers did everything he told them to do, cheerfully, because it never occurred to them to think that Grogan had a pretty safe and comfortable job for duration. And it never occurred to Grogan to think of them as soldiers. Anyone sick or injured was a patient and that went for Joe Keenan or old General Cranston himself. Put pajamas on a man and that broke the hierarchy for Grogan.

“You know what happened last night, Lootenants?” Grogan said. “Over in the Women’s Wing they had a colored baby born with no eyeballs. They call it a spectroconafossfamay or something. Very rare case they tell me. He’s O.K. except no eyeballs. Come to think of it,

you're pretty lucky I guess if you're born whole. What worries me sometimes is what a close shave you have of not being your own brother or sister. You know, Mendelian Law and all that? You might have a whole different set of combinations than the set you've got, see? I mean it's just chance that you're your own self when you look at it coldly. You might just as well be your brother or sister. I got fourteen brothers and sisters. I did have—some of them died—and I'd hate to be some of them that didn't. I got a sister married to a street car conductor in Baltimore; they chicken farm now, and I'd sure hate to be her. Seventh Day Adventist. All the time church. You know? And I got a brother in Fort Worth runs a Drive-In. He married a Chineese woman, half sort of, but he ruint the fam'ly. Slant eye kids. I'd hate to be him. We wax the floors, huh? We gotta have the waxer fixed. Kountze don't know how to work it right. Neither does Pillsbury. Too educated. Ain't that funny. Go to school and college too much and you can't ever learn anything again."

Mahon said, "Well, I'm off." She was tired suddenly and depressed and restless. She wanted her morning coffee and the sanctity of her lone bed. She looked tired. Her large eyes were dull with the night that had passed, and the faint touch of rouge on her lips stood out raucously against the gray fatigue of her face. She fluffed her hair with both hands and went out and down to the Mess.

Grogan got the two orderlies, Kountze and Pillsbury, started into the Ward with the wheel chairs and helped them get the washing detail going. Kountze was a little man with an important looking face and head. Dark hair, thinning on top and brushed over his ears on both sides in thick, dark wings. He wore nose glasses and held his head well, but he had nothing but a short, spindly body and a flat chest to hold it on. And there was nothing in his head but horse racing. He could take a dope sheet, study it for ten minutes, adjust it to his own thinking, and blow his roll faster than anyone else in the business. In 1934

he'd won four hundred dollars and lived on the memory ever since.

Pillsbury, the other orderly, was tall and thin and worried about his knees. He had an A.B. from Oklahoma Christian College, an M.S. from the University of the Southwest and almost a Ph.D. from Binns College. He'd never been out of the placid academic runways until the Army snatched him out and put him into an Infantry division. He'd never been able to think since, beyond his knees. There wasn't a thing wrong with his knees except that he honestly believed that there was. He had no idea that it was his personal escape mechanism. He wasn't intelligent enough to know that. He could think pains into his knees whenever he thought of them and he never quite stopped thinking of them. Even when he got out of the Army, he wouldn't stop. He'd go right on until he thought himself onto crutches, because once he'd thought himself out of the Infantry, he kept right on thinking about his knees. First thing in the morning. Last thing at night. Wendell Phipps Pillsbury. *Doctor Pillsbury*. "Hey Pills—*bedpan!*" And Grover Kountze: "There's a goat at Pimlico in the Third today that bears investment."

Grogan looked the Ward over carefully. He had a few knotty problems there that needed his personal attention. Halpern was one. You couldn't move Milton Halpern. He just lay there. "You want me washed, you wash me. You want me dressed, you dress me." But when Grogan got down to him, Schiappas was already in his chair between the beds, with his towel and his wash kit. "Milton," he said to Grogan, "is getting psychology. Milton comes wit me today. Milton's a big boy now."

"Shut up the talk," Halpern said, "and move out." He was sitting on the edge of his bed with his feet and legs out, searching for the floor with his toes.

"Wait, Milton," Grogan told him and he knelt quickly with a pair of cloth G.I. slippers for his feet. With his hands firmly on Halpern's ankles, the wardmaster eased

him to the floor. Halpern braced himself back against the bed.

"Hold it," Schiappas told Grogan. "You're 'a pretty good half-assed medic. It's granted. But me, I found this Halpern job. I got the contract. I run it my way. Milton—do just like I say. Stand up straight. Beat it, Grogan—you're surplus. Milton—put the left arm out and touch my chair back. Good. Now stand up."

Halpern stood up. "Look, Tony, I feel swaying. Am I swaying?"

"No—you ain't swaying. You been lying down too much. You're good. Now all you do is keep touching on the chair back and walk slowly as I wheel it." Schiappas started out between the beds into the center of the Ward and turned in a wide, slow arc toward the washroom.

"Hello, Halpern."

"Who gives?" Halpern's expressionless face strained suddenly, tightened.

"Benny Frischling. How you doing?"

"I ain't got the report of survey."

"You're doing O.K. from here it looks."

"Nobody dies," Schiappas said and rolled on up to Miss Keiffer's office. "Hey, Miss K. I got Milton under ten pounds pressure his own steam. How's that for a couple Brooklyn boys? How's to swab his eyes and leave me wash and shave him in the washroom with the boys?"

"Milton Halpern!" Miss Keiffer came over to him. "A fine pal! Would you do this for me? No."

"He don't like brunettes, Miss K. He likes blondes. Me—I like brunettes. Ast me I should do something for you. Quick. Ast me. Hold still, Milton, she fixes your eyes. O.K. Now come on, Milton."

In the washroom, Daley and Meneilley were putting Meredith into his prosthesis. He stood between their two chairs, bending down to them while they adjusted the straps across his chest and shoulders. Finally it felt right to Meredith. He stood still looking at himself in the mir-

ror, frowning, remembering what they had told him. Then he began to move the arms, awkwardly like the tentacles of a vague insect. "Them God-damned Krauts sure are careless with firearms," he grinned. He reached out towards his shaving brush, felt around it for a moment, hesitated, clamped home on it. With the other arm, he hooked onto the hot faucet and got the water going.

"Swell," Daley told him. "Keep going, Bill." Daley was brushing his teeth. He sat there now, the brush in his hand, the paste drying on his lips, watching Meredith, fascinated. Meneilley watched him. It was an intricate game—a competition that Meredith was in. He was sweating now. He had lather on one cheek and he got it in his eye. Daley swabbed it out with a towel end soaked in cold water.

"Independence, independence the man said." Meredith's voice was soft and fierce. He lathered the other cheek, extended the arm and dropped the shaving brush. "Details later. It ain't neat, but it's progress." He got the razor clamped in and moved it carefully to his cheek. After a rugged fashion, he made a couple of down strokes. "O.K.—I make my point. It ain't neat, but it's progress. Details later," and he laughed. Meneilley finished shaving him.

Daley said, "Money you get this way don't do you no good."

Jaxon in his chair always soaped his long, leathery face and scrubbed it like a dirty shirt, towelled it raw and red and clean under the fading tan, dried it to a shine. All his life he'd washed in buckets and bunk house basins, bitter cold water and coarse soap, towelled with rough towels. He was washing for his wife now. He thrust himself out of the chair onto a shower stool, with his massive arms, eased out of his gray pajamas pants and scrubbed his deep-chested body. Armpits and crotch and thighs, soaping thickly. He hadn't seen his wife in twenty-seven months. He didn't know how it would be when she saw

him now. He couldn't think how it would be, for the hunger came in on him whenever he thought of her—came in like a knife cut. So he scrubbed on fiercely, not thinking, just scrubbing.

Joe Keenan rolled himself into the washroom. "Here comes Foo Foo Dust," Paskow said. "Now the place gets stunk up like a whorehouse."

"When you first found out that you were half Czechoslovak and half Mick," Keenan said, "it beats the hell out of me how you kept from cutting your throat, Paskow."

"Fresh talk, Keenan. When they make me a civilian again, I cut you dead on the streets for it."

"On the streets where I'm seen," Keenan said, "nobody sees you." He shaved. He slapped on lotion, rubbing it behind his ears and down his neck and dabbing it into his armpits. He brushed his white teeth and rinsed them with a pink mouth wash, gargling it, smeeching it noisily through his clenched teeth. He put on hair tonic, rubbing it in with his fingers, combing his dark curly hair carefully until it pleased him.

"Kiss me." Frischling leaned toward him. "I can't stand it. I'm susceptible. Oh, hell—there they go with Charlie Whitehead—"

Everybody turned toward the door. They had Charlie on a truck, flat out under a blanket and a pale green sheet. Two Corpsmen in pale green, with face masks, one at the foot, the other pushing. Charlie had his eyelids crinkled tight shut. His blond kid hair was damp with the sweat of apprehension.

"Don't yell nothing," Meneilley told them sharply. "So he fights fifteen weeks in a traction splint. So he loses, I guess."

"You can't miss? You can always miss," Paskow said. "That's justice."

Schiappas in his chair had Milton Halpern sitting in front of him on a shower stool, shaving him.

"I want to go back to bed," Halpern said.

"You been doing so good, Milton—take it easy."

"Like hell."

"That stuff is old. It's got to stop."

"Like hell."

"Milton—don't say it. Don't get black inside, please, Boy."

"What's the use? Take me back to bed."

"O.K. O.K. Only don't say it, Milton. I'm your friend, remember?"

They were coming up from downstairs with the breakfast trays now. The light duty patrol. The Gangplank Detail, Daley called them, because they didn't belong to his beach club. They fell down gangplanks to get hurt on docks. They weren't hurt badly. Some weren't hurt. They had backs. Army backs. My back hurts. They had their red pants and jumpers on over their pajamas with M.D.U.S.A. on the pocket. "Here comes many die you shall also," Daley said.

Frischling said: "Daley, take five. You're getting clipped conscious, Heart Happy. You want to watch it. Some a those boys been to war, too."

A faint echo of the old bitter fear of not belonging raced up Daley's throat and hurt under his jaw. He looked at Frischling but he didn't speak. Better not. Better listen. Frischling liked him. Frischling was his friend. Everybody in Ward Twenty was his friend. He belonged. He was a part of it because he was clipped. That was definite. But in spite of it, maybe you could slip out of being a part of even an exclusive club.

"Some of these Joes on tray detail got shot. Maybe it don't show up plain as it does with you. But it's all one war. Two Joes together—one gets clipped, one gets scratched. They both started even, so nobody's a hero."

"Maybe you're right," Daley said. "Thanks, Pal," he told the tray man. "Looks good."

"It is good. It's breakfast."

Kountze, the orderly, moved in beside Meredith to feed him. Meredith said, "How come you didn't get to be a senator, Kountze? You got a face like a senator—a head like a senator. You couldn't know less than a

senator. You ought to be a senator. It don't take anything to be a senator. Anything *you* haven't got. I know—I was bell captain in a hotel in Washington once. I seen plenty senators. There's a great town, Washington. I'm going back there sometime. Better than any other town I ever worked in. Everybody in Washington is always trying to be taken for somebody else. Phonies. That's the fun of it in the hotel business. Doping the Phonies."

Kountze grinned. "So we start today with orange juice."

"We start every day with orange juice."

"O.K. We start." He held the orange juice to Meredith's lips.

Pillsbury, across the ward, propped Halpern up to feed him. "I ain't eating," Halpern said. "Throw it in the garbage."

"So go ahead, starve, I'm laughing," Meredith called to him. "Halpern, you're a dope. Let him feed you. Who gets service like you and me? It's a luxury hotel. They feed you and dress you and take you to the can and you gripe."

"Bushwa."

"Don't rib him," Meneilley whispered. "He's bad again. And you get too happy, I'm telling you. You go all the way the other way."

"I *am* happy," Meredith said. "Nothing gets me down. Nothing ever did. Nothing ever will. I'll get by, even with this—and I'll stay happy!" His voice was shrilling.

"Come on, Bill," Kountze said, "the cereal. Crema Wheat," and he raised the spoon to Meredith's mouth.

Tony Schiappas watched Pillsbury and Milton Halpern. Pillsbury waiting patiently to feed Milton. "Go ahead, Milton," Schiappas whispered. "Eat." After a second or two Milton ate. Schiappas looked at Pillsbury closely. He didn't see much there, just a long, sad pan with a pimple or two on it, weak looking eyes, and uncertain straw hair. "You been to college, ain't you, Pillsbury? What's it like?"

"That's a funny question," Pillsbury said.

"It's a question, ain't it? What's college like?"

"Well, I don't quite know," Pillsbury said.

"How do you like that? The guy goes to college and even then he don't know what it's like."

"Well, it depends on just what you mean," Pillsbury said.

"How do you like that? I ast a simple question off a guy who's been to college. I ast what college is like. And he can't tell me. He wants to know what I mean. I always thought you were a dope. You ain't changed my mind."

Pillsbury flushed. "Did you want to know about undergraduate life, about courses of study, or what, exactly?"

"Maybe we skip it," Schiappas said. "Maybe we get a War Department booklet instead. The Gov'ment's going to send the Army to college, see? As simple as that. I thought maybe I could get some advanced dope from you—for Milton and me on account of Milton and me going."

"Who says?" Milton growled. "Who says we going?"

"Milton," Schiappas told him, "don't excite yourself over breakfast."

"I ain't going to college."

"You sure as hell are," Schiappas said. "You can't miss. From the time they draft us we go the whole route. We don't stop now. We go to college."

"You're crazy," Milton said. "What good's college? I know a guy in Brooklyn went all the way to C.C.N.Y. to be a shoe clerk. Not even in the women's department, either."

"What college you go to, Pillsbury?"

"Oklahoma Christian, Southwest, and Binns."

"Never heard of any of them. Whyn't you go to Yale? They got football teams."

"It was a matter of finances."

"He says he didn't have the dough to go to Yale," Milton said.

"Milton, ya getting awful fresh wit me. Look, Pillsbury. Me and Milton go to Yale, see? Why should we be dopes? We go to all the trouble of going to college and a guy asts us where we went we say Yale. He knows then, see?"

"Are you prepared?" Pillsbury asked.

"We made up our minds," Schiappas said, "that's all the preparation we need. Milton's going to be a lawyer. I read in a magazine how it's possible. You hear me, Milton—a lawyer on the Army? Where was you on the night of the thirteenth—is that so? Gentlemen of the Jury, he lies like a stinker. He was in Cleveland at the Statler Hotel on the night of the thirteenth. Good, huh, Milton?"

"Nuts."

"Milton, *please*. That ain't refined."

Paskow poured his coffee. "Look, Schiappas, they got an Eastern Defense Command, yes? It's the war, yes? Off the shore in a boat you get a ribbon in the Navy for over thirty days? On the shore on patrol it's the war still?"

"What's it adding to, Paskow?"

"It's adding up to Charlie Whitehead's leg—"

"They taking it off now, upstairs."

"That's right," Paskow said. "The kid's on a shore patrol, see? In a jeep. A sub sinks a tanker and all the oil washes on the beach. There's a breakwater the kid gets out on to inspect like they told him. It's got oil. So he slips and hurts his shin and gets bone disease. Is it enemy action?"

Schiappas stared at Paskow. "Eat," he said. "Y' getting dopey fam hunger. Eat. I got troubles with Milton. Ast Keenan, he's a lawyer. Milton—drink your cawfee."

"I'll ask the WAC downstairs."

"Which WAC?"

"The one with the shape."

"They all got shapes. Some good. Some bad."

"The good shape one. The one that's stacked. In the Sergeant Major's Office."

"What'll you ast her?"

"I'll ask her."

"She'll tell ya no. Stacked WAC's get the pick. They can boggen."

"Dope. I won't ask her that."

"Why not? What can you lose?"

"Y' getting me mixed up, Schiappas, y' getting me mixed up. Shut up and talk to Milton. I'm thinking."

Joe Keenan took a long slug of coffee and lit his first cigarette of the morning. It felt good going through his body, relaxing him, killing the nicotine hunger that had built up while he was asleep. He could feel it going down his legs—not stopping—but going all the way down to his toes. Funny, that. Every morning the same thing. How could it be? He could spring out of bed on them almost—then his mind clamped tight against it.

He took another deep drag and lay back against the pillows. You have to get going, Joe. You're different than these others. You've got to get up and walk. You can't just lie in it and rot. There's the world—and money—and cars—and women. You've come back for it. Get it. There's a cut for you. Take it. You're smooth. Get smoother to make up for no legs. Get going.

"I am alaways short fella," Cancellare told Jaxon. "They call me Shorty Cancellare," he laughed. "This time I fool them. I get long legs!"

Jaxon looked at him. "Maybe the Doc won't let you. It's like this. All your life you've been looking at things with your eyes at a certain height. You're used to that. If you change that height—it's probably harder to learn again."

"Maybe is wrong, too, huh, Jax?" Pasquale's eyes were intent.

"How could it be wrong?" Jaxon said. "It's just a matter of what you've always been used to. All of it is only like learning to walk on stilts. So if you go and try to make yourself taller or shorter you only make more trouble for yourself."

"It could be wrong," Pasquale said, "because God knows what He wants and He makes you the way He wants you to be."

"If you're going to get God into this," Jaxon told him, "I'm dropping out."

"God has to be in it."

"That may be, but I don't know enough about God to talk. I just know cows and horses and Texas and a B.A.R."

"If God wants me six feet tall, He makesa me to be six feet tall. If five feet, he makesa five feet."

Jaxon smiled. "You've missed one bet, Pasquale. Like it stands with you now, you get a new deal."

"How is this new deal, Jax?"

"The way it stands now—you're not six feet and you're not five feet. Maybe that's the way this God of yours has of giving you your choice."

Pasquale sat up. "Jax—you believe that God?"

"Nope," Jaxon smiled and shook his head.

"You gotta, Jax," Pasquale said. "You think clean, you think good. Sure God give me choice. I couldn't think of that. You did. Jax, believe me, you gotta say you believe God or you burn in hell."

"Don't get me wrong," Jaxon said. "They ain't no use lying about it one way or the other. It just ain't, with me. That's all."

"Is gotta be, Jax," Cancellare pleaded softly.

"Go get your long legs and be six feet tall, Pardner. Me—I'm satisfied with life."

"Jax—you mind I pray for you?"

"Go ahead," Jaxon said. "If it helps you it can't hurt me."

The trays were going out. The Docs were in the passageway talking to Miss Keiffer, ready to go through the Ward. Major Stephano and Captain Broadbent and Lieutenant McIntyre. They came into the Ward and started around. They talked for a moment with Joe Keenan and looked at his left leg. Major Stephano unbandaged it himself. A tall man, Stephano, long-armed and slightly stooped. Always impersonal. It was an operation with him, never a man. A technique. He never saw other surgeons in a long line leading up to him. Tired and dirty clearing-station surgeons, pressed for time. All he saw

were the results, good or bad, and the necessity they brought him of accepting or rejecting the work that had been done. He'd been swung on once in Ward Twenty-two for his impersonality. "God damn you, you smug bastard, talk to me—not *about* me. It's my leg—it ain't butcher meat. Ask me what *I* want!"

Broadbent was young and vibrant with his youth. He was always a little angry in his mind because he could see all those other surgeons that led up to him—and he knew how they'd want to know about their results and never could know, because their cases streamed through them and went on thousands of miles away—so that they never became post operative to the men who had done the vital preliminary work. Angry for those men because their scientific knowledge was amputated, too. They never could follow it up. And he respected those men mightily because their work was mostly good work—excellent.

McIntyre was a toad. He didn't think and he had no emotions. His mind was merely a clearing house for the books he'd read, the words of the men who had taught him. He recalled words and phrases and thoughts intact, dispensed them intact. He never analyzed, combined, or struck new tangents of thought. He wasn't a physician—a surgeon. He was a product of cheap professional schooling because his father wanted him to have M.D. after his name, and had used the profits from a Third Avenue delicatessen to make it so.

"Miss Keiffer," Stephano said, "check with the orthopaedic shop about this case. A few days and it's ready." Miss Keiffer made a note.

Captain Broadbent leaned closer to the wound, touched it tentatively. "Sensitive?" he asked Keenan.

"Not much."

"It's an excellent job," Broadbent smiled. "There is a slight sinus, however. Don't force it. Don't fight it. Take your time."

They went on to Milton Halpern and stood for a mo-

ment looking at him as he lay quietly in his darkness, sensing them by ear.

Major Stephano frowned. "How long have we had the prosthesis here?"

"Four weeks."

"Progress?"

Miss Keiffer shook her head.

"You can take those God-damned tin arms," Halpern said quietly, "and stuff them."

Schiappas said, "Milton!" sharply. "It's the doctor."

"I don't care if it's twenty doctors. Get twenty arms. Stuff twenty arms."

Stephano leaned close to Halpern's face.

"Tanker?" Broadbent asked Halpern.

"So what?"

"I was a battalion surgeon in the Sixth."

"It was a lousy division," Halpern told him. "The Second was tops."

Broadbent said, "You like music?"

"Stuff music, too."

Broadbent laughed. "Don't get tough with me, Halpern. I never give a man up."

Schiappas grinned from the next bed. "Milton's O.K., Doc. He's up. He's down. Like everybody. He went to the washroom himself today. I'm looking out for him. He's my running mate."

Stephano had gone on, without a word, and started impersonally to check Schiappas. Broadbent knew exactly what reaction there had been in Stephano's mind. Surgery had done its job with Halpern. That ended Stephano's interest.

He was no damned psychiatrist.

Broadbent put his hand on Halpern's forehead. "You're all right," he said quietly. "Remember that, Soldier."

"Sure, I'm fine. I'm tops. Beat it."

"Don't be a stinker, Milton. Say you're sorry to Doc Broadbent."

"Why should he?" Broadbent grinned. "He isn't—now."

Later he will be. Maybe he'll remember then—and tell you. If he does—tell me.”

“Milton,” Schiappas said, “I’m ashamed of you.”

They went on and stopped for a moment at Charlie Whitehead’s bed.

“Colonel Mayhew is operating—this morning,” Miss Keiffer said quietly.

“Ah, yes. Yes,” Stephano said, “I told him he’d have to, eventually.”

God damn you, Stephano, Broadbent thought at him fiercely, can’t your own mind tell you that this isn’t plumbing—that it isn’t mechanical—that these are men and that young Whitehead’s sweated out that leg for weeks? You’re a fine surgeon, a wonderful surgeon. A robot with superb technique. But you’re no physician. You couldn’t cure a louse.

And suddenly that strange trick of Roy Broadbent’s mind turned again and there were all these lives leading inexorably into Ward Twenty from across the torn world, from all sorts of beginnings, from all parts of the country, like telephone trunk lines plugged into a switchboard. And there they would stay forever, unless you replugged them, made new connections, completed old calls. A knife couldn’t ever do it.

Keenan back there. High school and business college and a whiz at shorthand. Tight-lipped enough to be confidential man for Joseph P. Stanislav in the 14th Ward. Pin-striped suits and flashy ties. Patent-leather dancing shoes on slender feet. A smooth talker and a pistol ball with women, but taught to keep his nose clean for politics. Tumulty had sent him to night law school—to point for the State Assembly with his diploma. Lieutenant Runciman had sent him up the mud road into the village of Lae to relieve the Walkie Talkie man with the forward Aussie elements. White beer froth foamed under the beached bows of the LSI’s and reached lazily up the foreshore, wetting down the bases of unloaded oil drums. There was a jeep tearing along the beach with Aussies in it. Fawn-colored Limey lorries with snub snouts. And at the edge

of the road leading into the village and the road to Nadzap, two boot soles with shiny worn-down hob nails glinting in the foetid sunlight, strewn rags beyond them an angry mat of green flies. Joe Keenan started to take it running, with a quick hunch. There was an American bulldozer just ahead, roaring and growling its blade into heaped earth, drowning out the bark of a Bofors off to the left. Joe Keenan knew the Bofors was firing because he could see the shells feeding and the muzzle bobbing—but the bulldozer drowned the sound. Keenan saw the shadow, though. The shadow dusted him, flicked him, howled over him, its motor rising in a scream above the bulldozer's for one brief, hesitant second before a thick sheet of earth roared upward, blotting the gun, the bulldozer, and the sun from Joe. Hours later he heard his own voice scream frantically, "*Where's the rest of me!*"

Then the long Pacific miles and the weeks—to Ward Twenty.

Stephano said, "Miss Keiffer—I want Goldthwait exercises for this case in Therapy, in addition to short wave." He was standing beside Cancellare. He had Cancellare turned on his face and he was probing a finger into Cancellare's buttocks, pressing it home firmly. Miss Keiffer made a note.

Roy Broadbent thought of Cancellare. Little Pasquale Cancellare running up and down the long rows of tomato plants, digging his toes into the black New Jersey loam. Riding to Camden on the ancient Mack truck with his father who always smelled beautifully of garlic and dried sweat and shag tobacco. Sitting in the vast lap of his laughing, fecund mother, listening half frightened, half melting with objective love while she talked of her saints as if they were alive all around her—as if she had known them. They were and she had. Telling him of the golden sun sheathing the Bay of Naples and of the tiered and storied town behind.

She told him of the moon wash on Castel dell' Ovo and of the beautiful funeral of her godfather's mother in

Poggioreale and of the guards at the royal palace. It was like a dream city in his mind, mixed eternally with what she told him of Heaven. When he died, somehow he would go to Naples, too.

He went to Naples alive on the first of October, 1943. Black smoke from Hun destruction hung high over the university and the central station. The schoolboys lay dead in the gutters of Vomero, still clasping the weapons they had taken from Fort St. Elmo. There was no sunshine—nothing but hunger and filth and the wanton spoor of war. The water mains were blasted in seven places. The sewage system was blasted into foul and stagnant contamination. Dangerous civil prisoners were loose in the streets. The electric lights and power were out, the telephones were cut. Acrid smoke stained the crisp October air.

Cancellare was laying the new water main when the time bomb blew. There was a broken, bomb-pitted trace of century-old masonry wall just across the street from the Engineers' excavation. There was a long line of civilian women and men and children lining up for water from the white-starred U.S. Army trucks—and a horse-drawn cart with oval wicker baskets of peppers and cucumbers and eggplant and apples. The horses blurred and blew out sideways into a long crimson smear. The people on the water line were gone. Pots and pails and wine bottles twisted lazily high in the air. A shower of peppers and eggplant pelted the pavement fiercely, spattering their insides into Pasquale's face. He started to move out on his gut as they'd taught him. No noise—that was funny—everything broken up, but no noise. It was weeks before he heard again—but only a few seconds before he saw what he was dragging after him as he tried to crawl away—saw with utter disbelief and sudden, white horror.

So across the Mediterranean and the African and the Atlantic miles, Cancellare came to Ward Twenty.

Truncated pyramids, their lives. Stopped in the building—at Ward Twenty—to be rebuilt from there on out.

Jaxon, with his long shanks a part of a horse for all his years before—his pale eyes a part of the distances of the Southwest, his mind a part of the simplicity of the wind in the Panhandle.

Buna Mission and Maggot Beach. Four thousand dead Americans and Australians, but Jaxon had come back from it—to Ward Twenty.

They had Jaxon cold and he knew it. He was isolated with his right ankle smashed, lying in a slight depression on a down slope where there was a bald spot in the kunai grass between the Mission and Buna Village. They had him with two knee mortars. Shells were hitting behind him and hitting the trees in front and bursting high up like time fire. So sell out. Search each tree with short bursts, someone is observing—cool down and sell out. He got two of them, plummeting them out like sacks of rice, hearing the soft crunch of them as they hit in the kunai grass. Then, there was a closer whistle above his head but he heard no explosion, and two days later they found him, alive only from sheer instinct and the tenacity of his simple living.

Miss Keiffer said, "Jaxon has a three-day pass. His wife is coming."

Major Stephano nodded. He walked on to Meneilley. Broadbent was furious in his mind at the impersonality—he got that way every morning, but he was helpless. Stephano ranked him and there was no turning to McIntyre, who was merely filling his mind with patter to re-dish. So Broadbent kept most of his mind on the men.

Schiappas and Milton Halpern. The Brooklyn boys. Halpern from Gravesend where even the air is kosher. Schiappas from Atlantic Avenue. So it's all Brooklyn. Schiappas had been at Taihpa Ga—had swum in the Tanai River. He had been in the perimeter at Walabum. He'd trained at Jhansi, half the world away from Brooklyn, in India, in Assam, in Burma. He'd seen snow on the

Himalayas, sweltered in the monsoon, seen the slow, brown waters of the Brahmaputra. He read. He told Halpern. "So I get it," Halpern said. "So India is just like Brooklyn only bigger." Schiappas was shocked. "How can you say that and you a Brooklyn boy!" But Halpern could say anything because there was the narrow street ahead into Castleforte with the walls broken and tiles blown clear of the roof tops and all the glass gone. And there was a weapons carrier on fire with arms and shoulders—but no head—still around the steering wheel and a flat scab of flies on the neck stump. The first number on the plate was 8 and there was the rich, sweet stink of new dead, sweetening to black rottenness, and the wind blowing red leaves on a vine and a terrified, white-eyed bitch streaking across in front of him, dugs low and trailing. The sun on everything—the bright, warm sun. Then it all went out like a blown light into eternal darkness—went out under something that tore into his face, shredding his upflung hands and arms. So he could say anything—even to Schiappas, who had seen the cities of the world in his travels and read avidly now to know them and describe them to Milton.

Stephano was looking at Meneilley's left leg. "I don't like this too much. Look at it, Broadbent."

"Don't get an idea you're going to slice off some more," Meneilley said. "I told you last time to make up your minds. Everybody's been going up that leg for months like termites. Here it stops. It's not baloney sausage."

Broadbent smiled. "Don't worry so much, Soldier."

"It makes me happy to worry—it's the Russian in me."

Stephano said, "It has not drained too well. That's the point I make. Miss Keiffer, I'll want to change the dressings and I want heat therapy stopped for a few days. I'll talk to you about this later."

"Talk now," Meneilley said. "What can you lose?"

Stephano went on. Broadbent stayed for a moment more. "It's superficial," he said. "I'm not lying." Meneilley stared at him in cold hostility. Meneilley from the side

streets of Chicago, hooking on the backs of trucks from as far back as he could remember, loving the noise and the life of it. Playing hooky from school. Running a paper route for the Trib at nine. Getting caught and brought back by the truant officer. Crazy to get into the world. Lying about his working papers. Beating the rap by an inch on reform school over Minnie Bienstok who made love standing up in doorways and alleys with anybody.

Working for Hostetter-Grimes, for Overland-Cushing and driving for them before he was twenty. The life! The roaring freight trucks on the night highways, tooling them west with the dying sun, west to the silver moonrise. Thousands of pounds behind you in control of your hands, your feet, your brain—adventure ahead. The free-hipped girls at the Drive-ins, fresh as paint and independent. Acting like movie actresses they'd seen, until you got it, then dissolving into the Minnie Glotzes they were. So you drove on and got paid and your life was good and you'd always be young. And the Army wrote in truck driver on your record, so you drove a jeep and the whole God-damned front of it blew off on a mine at Gafsa and the guy next to you told you they had to cut you out of it, like they cut the top turret gunner's body out of the crash at Maison Blanc, like they cut the highway patrolman out of the drive chain of the Hostetter-Grimes crash at Cicero that night.

"I'm not lying," Broadbent said again. "I never lie."

"Thanks, Doc," Meneilley told him. "I'm sorry."

Paskow called from across the Ward. "Captain Broadbent—could I see you after? Strictly confidential?"

Paskow from Centralton, Pennsylvania. The coal miner. Dirty, coal-dusted snow in the yards of the Company houses. All alike, the Company houses, inside and out. Pot-bellied stoves in the parlors on decorated tin mats on the linoleum. Coffins in the parlors—cheap coffins. Borsch in the kitchens. Wakes and weddings. An arm torn off old Pop Prymyl in the pit head cable drum. Thirty men dead in Centralton Number Seven with the

widows and children screaming and clawing at the Company fence. Martha Oспенko's got a baby by that Steve Pryzak and he's beat it. Good for him. How's he know? She could have got it by a dozen men. Hunger and death and happiness all tied to the coal and the unions. *And those damned bastards all out on strike the day we hit Ste. Mère-Eglise.*

So there's a dead Kraut in the hedgerow—you can see it because his helmet's off and it's slopped full of half his head, and a live one hiding beside and he gets up and heaves the grenade and tearasses up the road and I leave him have it in the small of the back with my rifle—a clip, forgetting the grenade—and he folds and the grenade blows and I fold and they leave us both lay where Jesus flung us until B Company comes up—but if I ever get back to the States I'm going straight to the Local in Centralton on my stumps and call them bastards to their thick-headed faces for striking on us!

Broadbent said, "What is it, Paskow?"

"Could you send me all the dope quick on the Purple Heart—all the latest dope that lets medical officers give it?"

"Didn't you get it, Paskow?"

"Didn't I get it, Doc? Didn't I get it in both legs? It's for a sick friend," Paskow grinned.

Stephano was looking at Daley. "This was excellent work," he was telling McIntyre. "Couldn't have been better with our facilities here. One operation and the case is ready. Eleven weeks today. You may start the Orthopaedic shop on this case now."

Daley, Broadbent thought. The little outcast. Written all over him. Some people are like that. Unclean, maybe. Unwanted. Unliked. The desperate souls eventually who turn on the gas or jump from the roof tops. The little, unknown, unthought-of men of the world. But not Daley. He'd seen no war at all—but a direct hit on an LST that had buttered twenty men and Battalion Headquarters across the bulkhead and clogged steaks of them into the

elevator so it wouldn't go up or down—had put Daley into a fraternity he'd cling to all his life. Twenty years from now in the Veterans' meeting at St. Louis, Daley would dominate it from the sacrosanct pedestal of plastic feet—mouthing stupidities, platitudes, and columnists' warmed-over clichés and making himself heard because you can't refute two plastic feet. Is that so? Well, I was there, Charlie, see? And I know. Omaha Easy Red. Where was you f'rinstance?

Daley, the insurance investigator, the cheap credit man, the brush salesman—forevermore on a pension, with never a finger to lift. Funny papers and ball games, beer, bull and barbershops. What difference does it make if you walk—your mind will always crawl aimlessly on its gut. Plugged into Ward Twenty forever—with no salvage.

"McIntyre," Broadbent said, "go to my office and ask Sergeant Kilroy to give you the latest regulations on the Purple Heart. Bring them to me."

"Always errands."

"That's right. Don't get lost."

"I'm a doctor."

"You've got papers to prove it, too. Haven't you?" Broadbent went over to Major Stephano. He had Meredith sitting up in bed.

"A dress form," Meredith chuckled. Broadbent looked quickly at his eyes. There was something in Meredith's eyes suddenly that he didn't like at all.

"I'm a dress form," Meredith said. "Put me in a show window. Send me back to Washington and put me in Garfinkle's show window—or Hecht's. I don't want to work for no cheap colored dressmaker down Delaware Avenue," and he laughed again.

Meredith the Cracker. Waycross, Georgia to Washington, to Buffalo, Des Moines, and Denver. Bell captain in the Hotel Senator once. Bottles and ice and ginger ale and a side line in call girls. A long line of snake whip overseers behind him. Share croppers. Mean and little and underfed. Sow belly and hominy grits. Grease and corn liquor.

Stephano was talking about Meredith's back muscles. Somebody's technique. Looking at Meredith's prosthesis. The answer wasn't there. It was in Meredith's eyes. Why can't Stephano see that?

Meredith, who had run crouching across the St. Loperiers Road, frightened to his dribbling diarrhetic bowels. White minded and blind with fear. There was a burning half track with the smell of seared meat in it and a telephone wire snaking the roadside and running into a hole with two eight-by-eights roofing it. He leapt to it. In there, in the foot, blow off the foot with my own rifle—at the ankle. Get out alive somehow. And he fell, sprawled out, arms ahead of him to break the fall, and tried frantically to get up but only his forehead and the clanking brim of his hat came to bear on the hot road surface. His arms wouldn't—his hands wouldn't. Rifle—*keep the rifle!* He groped for it. Hot fire burned fiercely to his shoulders. He looked under his hat brim. He threw up, mouth and nostrils—screaming abjectly into the muffling, bitter acid.

Stephano was still dictating to Miss Keiffer, Meredith lay down. Broadbent stepped around to Frischling's bed. "How are we, Frischling?"

"We're good."

"Good," Broadbent said.

Frischling, the tuna fisherman. Born to the waterfront and the little stout Pacific fish boats, chasing the schools and running them down for the lush kill. Frischling the Carthaginian, the Phoenician and not knowing it. With an eye for weather and a hunch for currents and an instinct for storms—but serving the canning factories instead of yesteryear's markets of piracy. Lost in his Race among ring-eared Portuguese and Italians and Mexicans until he was faced with it one day in San Francisco. *You dirty Kike*. Who, me? I'm as good as anybody. But from that day he knew. Jew. Jew. Jew. One man is a Jew. One man is a Gentile. Both are men. So he read everything—slick Jew books that annoyed him. Calm, studious books that didn't face the question. A Race within Races—always—unified in disunity. Disliked. Hated. And he was proud.

He had his own boat—saving money and not yet twenty-three. They were killing Jews. Old Jew men and women. Raping Jew girls. Who? Squareheads. God damn! *So Jews weren't good soldiers?* Nuts. I'm as good as anybody. *I can do what anybody else can.* He missed out on the Air Corps—but he was small, compact. A paratrooper. So I'll kill those German bastards! So look out for Benny Frischling with a knife and a gun. *Geronimo!* Rip-cord-Benny the Jew Boy, the Kraut killer. Am I good? *Am I good!*

They were piling the gliders in thick. Gray sighs in the sky, shrilling to air-slick screams, racing in for landings at over a hundred miles an hour. Benny's jump had the bridge and the road blocks were in, but the gliders were landing down the barrels of flak guns. One, at a thousand feet, broke open with a direct hit and spilled soldiers like a broken box, screaming, kicking, plummeting soldiers. Benny Frischling stepped in one, slipped headlong in him, fell in him—racing toward a glider crash. He looked into the crash through the fuselage fabric. Screams. Dig for the unearthly screams. Arms caught and twisted like pretzels—a Tommy gun like a spit—through three bellies with a cylinder of glistening red meat plugging its muzzle. Legs all crumpled up into laps. Feet in armpits. "Christgetmeout! *Getmeout! Getmeout!*"

Frischling got one out. Went in again and a glider behind crashed headlong into them, rolling and welding both gliders into one and he was caught in it upside down, his knees jammed into steel shears, one ear gone and the screams deafening the other, rising and falling screams, like a ghastly raid siren—blood dripping into his face, urine from the dead.

Stephano finished with him.

Broadbent said, "Frischling—talk to Halpern now and then, will you? He needs help. Talk does it sometimes."

Frischling's long, dark sea-face looked up at him, his eyes questioning.

"Halpern? I do, Doc. Oh," he nodded. "I get it. Sure. I'll talk to him."

"Thanks."

McIntyre came back and held out papers to Captain Broadbent. The captain took them down to Paskow. When he got back to the passageway, Miss Keiffer was alone in her office. He turned and looked back into the Ward. It was white and clean and shiny and restful again. The smoke of combat that his memory sooner or later brought back into all his present was fading from it—the noise was dying to a faint echo. All that was left was the results—the pay off—the twisted wires to be re-plugged into living connections again—Broadbent went on after Major Stephano.

Miss Keiffer relaxed. The Ward was hers again and she went back into it as commander. She could humanize it now, get it going again on a personal basis. You got all kinds of doctors but, in combination, they were all prima donnas to Keiffer. Stephano, the surgeon—as fine as they come. Precise, sure, deft and ingenious. But lost in the icy caves of surgery. Knowing and caring for nothing beyond. Broadbent, young and beautifully schooled to the tradition of searching everywhere in the attempt to know all approaches. Finding the challenge to his professional obligations too great for his youth. Angered against time, that failed always to give him enough of an answer before it slipped on and left him. McIntyre, encased in the scar tissue of professional patter which covered the wounds his ignorance eternally opened in his pride.

"Come on now, my hearties," Keiffer said, "hit the deck!"

"Sailor talk," Schiappas said. "A *fine* thing."

Keiffer was an old hand at all of it. Twenty-one years capped, she'd seen everything there was to see, dealt successfully with most of it, and still had enough resilience left to take on whatever the rest of it might bring to her. Not once did she regret the bargain she had struck with life—trading off permanent possession of one man for better or for worse, for all the sick and injured men in

Christendom. You had them, when they were hurt and sick. They were kids again—babies, with their manhood gone in pain and helplessness. You brought it back to them—for other women. It dried your shrunken loins but it kept your mind going and that's what counts. Your mind.

Keiffer pointed her finger at Schiappas. "A bath. Clean pajamas. Physical Therapy. Joe Keenan—after Therapy—you go to Orthopædics for measurements. No paper. They'll know about you when you get there. Paskow, never mind reading. Therapy, quick! Pasquale Cancellare up and at 'em. After short wave this morning you tell Miss Hassenpfeffer you are to go into the gym for Goldthwait exercises."

"It sounds just like Hassenpfeffer to me," Meredith laughed.

"It is Hassenpfeffer. Can you remember, Cancellare? Never mind. Stop at the office. I'll write it down. Jaxon, get dressed. Daley, after Therapy, go to Orthopædics with Keenan for measurements. Meneilley—no more Therapy until I tell you."

"What'll I do instead?"

"Library. Red Cross. Move around. Improve your mind. Meredith, Therapy, and Frischling, Therapy. Are there any questyounnes?" Miss Keiffer raised her arm overhead—"Geronimo! Move out!"—and dropped it with a snap as if she were starting a race. She was worried about young Charlie Whitehead—damned worried. They were keeping him upstairs too long—too long. She went to the foot of Milton Halpern's bed. "Tough guy," she said. "I'm starting in on you. You're going to Therapy in a wheel chair today, not flat on your back on a truck."

"Shet up, Milton," Schiappas warned him. "It's Miss Lootenant Keiffer."

"I'll handle him," Keiffer said. "Kountze—or Pillsbury," she called. "Chair for Halpern, right here and now. No more trucks. Sit up, Milton—"

Paskow was off, racing Cancellare up the Ward.

Keenan was already out the door in his chair. Meredith was in his chair with Grogan, the wardmaster, wheeling him. Daley was under his own power, tailing behind.

"Come on, Milton," Schiappas said, "I'll be right with you all the way."

Miss Keiffer leaned close to Halpern's ear. "I know it's tough, Milton. It's tougher than anything." She put her cool hands firmly on both his shoulders and pressed inward as you do with little fellows to make them belong and stop howling. Suddenly he pressed his scarred forehead tight against her arm and a great sob wracked his chest. "But, Milton," her voice was soft, "in Ward Thirteen—there are whole men, with no minds. Which is better?"

"Whatever you say, whatever you say." Milton shook his head helplessly. "I'll get in the chair myself."

Schiappas sucked in his breath and when they were out in the passage, wheeling along, he said, "Milton, I'm so proud of you—dat's *Brooklyn!*"

"To you," Halpern said, "*nuts.*"

Paskow didn't go to Therapy. He rolled his chair down the back passage to the elevator, went down to the first floor and rolled up past the Mess and out into the front corridor to the offices, easing along past the open doors, Chief of Surgery, Chief of Medical Service, until he came to the Sergeant Major's Office. There he stopped outside and stared in at Pfc. Sally Welland until she looked up at him. He beckoned to her and smiled. She looked startled for a moment. A slender girl, Sally Welland, with a nice body, nice legs. She pointed to herself, questioningly. Paskow nodded. She got up from her desk and came out to him in the corridor, crisp in a freshly pressed uniform shirt and skirt, her dark hair clean stranded. She smelled clean.

"Look, Lamarr," Paskow said. "You can do me a favor, a big favor. For another Joe, too—he's in the operating room now. Name of Charlie Whitehead, Ward Twenty," and he read off Whitehead's ASN from the slip

of paper he had jotted it on. "Guy's losing a leg right now. Lost it by now. It ain't hay—a leg. I want you should show me all his papers how he got hurt."

"But I can't do that," Sally told him. "That's against regulations."

Paskow nodded. "I knew you'd say that first. Everybody says that first. It's habit. It's Army. It's easy."

"But really it is."

"Sure, sure—but you're a nice girl, a bright girl—you're going to help. You're going to give out. This Whitehead, he ain't overseas. Three years maneuvers and he ain't overseas. Carolina maneuvers, Desert Training Center, Camp Hood and Blanding. It eats a man. Now look—I want he should get the Purple Heart. It's little enough. They give it to staff officers for scratches. Why shun Charlie get it for a leg? Here's how it is. A tanker gets sunk off Florida—that's enemy action. The oil comes on the beach, on the breakwater. That's still enemy action, that oil. Charlie Whitehead is Eastern Defense Command. He's on beach patrol. He slips on the breakwater, hurts his leg, and gets bone disease. Enemy action."

"But what does it all add up to?"

"Like this, Sweetheart," Paskow said. "That's how Charlie tells it to me. All I want is you should tell me if it's correct from the records. You don't have to show me—just look and tell me. New regulations let a medical officer give the Heart. If it's enemy action, I can tell Captain Broadbent, he'll check with you, and we got the Heart pinned on Charlie he comes outa ether. See?"

"Sit right here a minute," Sally said and she went back inside the office. Paskow saw her stop at her desk a minute, look at the slip of paper and cross to the bank of green metal filing cases. She thumbed through for a minute, then she drew out a folder and took it back to her desk, going through the dossier inside. She made some notes as she went along. She frowned. She ran a hand lightly across her nice hair.

Some tomato, Paskow thought. So what? So I get to know her. It ain't likely, but you never know when you

hit the jackpot. It's how they feel. Can't hurt trying. I'm a mug, but you never know. Mugs get around, too. Surprise themselves. Keep Keenan off this one. This would be Keenan's meat. A talker, Keenan. A fast worker. I wonder has he knocked off Mahon yet?

Sally Welland was coming out again. She said, "Here are all the dates. You were right. Camp Blanding, Florida. The original report from the station hospital is 'injury in line of duty—fall on breakwater, compound fracture.' "

"That's it. That's it," Paskow said.

"Will it do?"

"Yes, yes. What's your name?"

"Welland. Sally Welland."

"Sally—you're a good kid," he grinned. "When I'm dancing again we go dancing. How's about?"

"Sure—call me. Don't forget."

"I don't forget anything. I'm a rememberer. An elephant."

You're being nice. You're pitying me, it's in your eyes. Go to hell. "Thanks," he said and he wheeled off fast. Turn 'em upside down and they all look alike.

It was warm in Therapy and friendly. A club. It bustled. It was cheerful. It smelled good. Clean towels in great white stacks. Warm radiators. Starched blue cloth and starched white cloth. Disinfectant. Rubbing oil. Warm flesh. And the smell of busy women. Strong women in Therapy with tight-muscled figures from hard work. Hard legs in white cotton. Strong, tanned arms and capable fingers. Strong women, gentle in strength, bringing men back to their own strength. Giving them legs from their legs, arms from their arms. A rather dreadful re-wombing. Water sang in the high-sided chromium baths, swirling circulation back into atrophied muscles, stimulating, warming, drawing life in again from the outside. Lights glowed in golden cylinders of sheeting, forcing warmth into tissue that had had warmth blasted from it.

Short-wave cabinets poured the heat in deeper, getting down to healing bone ends, warming, soothing.

Female bodies rubbing strength back inexorably into males, going deep into muscle, stimulating the blood flow through new capillary channels, accustoming the arterial and venous systems to their new fore-shortening.

And the gymnasium, where the rebirth was no longer passive—where it became active. Twenty-five forward. Twenty-five backward. Twenty-five sideways. Against the thigh straps—against the sliding weights. Up and down. Up and down with your hands on the sides of the pens to steady yourself.

And then hopping on down to a table. Everybody hopped in the gym. Hop, hop, hop and sit. Creak of weights. Hop, hop, hop and sit. Miss Hassenpfeffer's stronghold.

Schiappas, Keenan, Cancellare, Daley, Meredith, Frischling, and Halpern.

"So help me, it's Milton Halpern in a chair!" Gretchen said.

"So what, you big Swede? So hook me up in series. So short circuit me," Milton said.

"Come, Milton." Gretchen got hold of him and got him up on his feet and walked him to his table. She unbandaged him and adjusted the pads for short wave, bandaging them on again, turning the dials. "Warm, Milton?" Pink cheeked, deep breasted, heavy thighed Gretchen.

"Good," he grunted.

"You know, Milton," she said, "we're going to take us out some night and get us pie-eyed."

"Ask Schiappas—he's my manager. I'm pretty well booked up."

Frischling was on the next table. "You been to Berlin, Gretchen?"

"Sure. When I'm a girl. I'm born in Oslo."

"They got anything there? I don't mean by the papers now. I mean before?"

"Oh, yes," Gretchen said.

"I always wanted to go but I missed the boat now," Frischling said. "To see what they got. To see if they got good stuff like they knocked down—stuff like Italy. I always wanted to chase 'em through what they got left."

"They got some good stuff."

"Not like Italy, huh?"

"No. Solid. Heavy. The Kurfürstendamm's pretty in the fall. The leaves turn. It's clean, fresh, nice."

"Maybe they knock stuff down because they haven't got good stuff themselves. Like kids?"

"I don't know." Gretchen shook her head. "Maybe." She went over to Cancellare. Frischling turned his head sideways toward Halpern. The heat felt good in him. "Milton—you kill some Germans. You kill a lot?"

"Some. Not a lot."

"You know you killed some?"

"Sure I know I killed some. When you got a 75 in a tank—you know."

"You see 'em after?"

"Sure I see 'em after, what's left."

"That's good, huh, Milton? Me, I got a knife in the neck of one. Me, I'm a killer for them guys. It's good."

"What's eating on you, Frischling?"

"Remembering," Frischling said. "You want to remember more, too, Milton. You had to do it. You had to get it. You're a Jew boy. It's a thousand years. Five thousand. It comes out right in the end. Supermen my ass. I'm as good as anybody. What I always thought before a jump, was Jew girls, see? Lublin. All over. A Jew girl has got real virtue. Those bastards forced millions. Held 'em down. Tied them up. Took it. A Jew girl is brought up right. She don't leave it around careless, don't play with it, see? Well, I paid off some. You paid off some. Remember that, Milton."

"I remember everything," Milton said. "I got to. I can't know anything new."

"You're a dope. You can, too."

"What can I?"

Frischling got up on an elbow. "Women," he said.

Milton cackled.

"I ain't kiddin' you. You been telling everybody to shut up all the time. You gotta cut that. You gotta be friends with the world."

"I suppose Gretchen?"

"No—not Gretchen, you dope. Somebody though. You need it, Milton—I'll get it for you."

"When?"

"Tonight."

Daley watched Keenan, fascinated. He always watched Keenan in Therapy. Keenan had Anna. Anna was spraying his left leg. He held it sticking up. Daley knew what Keenan was thinking. He knew what was in Anna's mind, too. He could see the pulse in her throat. Keenan did it on purpose, held it up, to get Anna that way because she was a thin clape. Scrawny. Passed over. Tiny waisted with a behind like two clam shells. Nobody but Keenan could think of that. It dried Daley's throat. It stung his eyeballs. It crawled in his stomach.

Hildegarde was re-bandaging Meredith.

"You came down with your prosthesis."

"That's right," Meredith said. "Put it on me again. Independence. I'm wearing it all the time now. I'm going to sleep in it. I can pick up things now. It ain't too hard."

"They won't let you sleep in it."

"Sure," Meredith said. "If I ask. To get used to it. I got to do for myself. It's a handicap not to. Takes your self-respect. The Man said so."

"I get it," Hildegarde said. "Keep at it."

"You know. Dressing, washing—all that."

"Yes," Hildegarde said. "You've got a good attitude."

Meredith laughed. "They say I'm too happy. Can you be too happy?"

Paskow wheeled into Doc Broadbent's office. Maybe it was an argument. Maybe not. Stretching it thin, but it still tied together. It made sense. All he had to do was

make Broadbent see it and Broadbent was a good guy. He had feeling. Besides, look at all the Joes who got the Heart for scratches. It was little enough, the Heart, for what Charlie Whitehead went through—months of sweating out. Three or four hospitals. Traction splints.

The office was empty. Paskow pulled out a butt and touched it off, sitting there smoking. Maybe I could be a doctor on the Gov'ment. Schools an' all, free. What's it like to know medicine? To call the shots on sick guys like Doc Wriston, the Company doctor, calling the shot on my old lady's cancer? Maybe it gets you. You gotta be tough to be a doc sometimes, tough inside to yourself and kind outside.

Miss Keiffer came in suddenly. She had a khaki, zipped-up wash kit in her hands and three opened letters in their envelopes and a handkerchief and half a pack of Camels and a paper covered who-dun-it book and a worn, cheap leather billfold and a wrist watch.

"You're supposed to be in Therapy, Terrible Ivan. What are you doing here?"

"Me, I got business with the Doc, Beautiful."

"What kind of business?"

"Never mind. It's legitimate business. I already talked to him this morning. One miss at Therapy won't kill me."

"He's gone to early lunch."

"When will he be back?"

"After lunch." Miss Keiffer put the things she carried on Doc Broadbent's desk top, in a little pile at the back against the wall.

"I wanted to see him before lunch—Charlie Whitehead down yet?"

Miss Keiffer looked at him. "He's not coming down."

"What do you mean he's not coming down? Where's he going?"

"Paskow—Charlie went out."

"I don't get it."

"Nor anybody. He had enough, maybe. There wasn't any reason for it, except maybe inside him. He must have just let go. Poor kid," Keiffer said.

"He's dead, huh?"

She nodded.

"How do you like it?" Paskow said angrily. "*How do you like it?*" He took a grip on his chair wheels and pulled viciously toward the door. "God damn, that's hell, ain't it?" He rolled out into the passage, turned toward the Ward. Down the Ward, next to his own, was Charlie Whitehead's bed, newly made, crisp white—the end table cleared beside it. Everything gone. The radio earphones hanging on the head of the bed, waiting for the next one.

"Look, Keiffer," said Paskow, "I want a midnight pass. Can do?"

Keiffer stood in the doorway. "How about going with Meneilley to the Reconditioning Lecture in the Red Cross? You have ten minutes to make it."

Meneilley snorted. "An' hear some dope spout for an hour about how he'd do it if he was me?"

"Improve your mind," Miss Keiffer said.

"My mind's all improved up," Meneilley told her.

"Come on," Paskow called to him. "Let's get the hell out of here. It's got maggots—Brooklyn Boys."

"To horse, Meneilley." Keiffer started for him.

He rolled out into his chair. "You're brutal, Keiffer. There's no justice in Ward Twenty. No democracy. It ain't what I fought for, Ward Twenty."

Jaxon stood in the pillared portico with the sunlight burning into his face. It was good, the feel of it. Tall, deep chested Jaxon. People looked at him. You couldn't miss him. He was built like a soldier and he looked like a soldier. Buck sergeant with all the trimmings. Five gold overseas stripes, the Combat Infantry Badge, the D.S.C., the Star, the Heart, and three stars on his Pacifico. His uniform cleanly pressed and his cap cocked tight to his long, lean head. Fifteen steps to go down to the taxi—take a breath. He gripped his rubber-shod canes and started down. "No, I don't need help, thanks, Soldier." Right foot, left foot, think about it all the time at first. Do it just as they told you to do it and after awhile it will get to be

habit. You won't have to think. Hell—it's good now, considering what it was at first. He side-wheeled into the taxicab. "Hotel Forsberg."

He had written Clara.

Dear Clara. I got a room at the Hotel Forsberg for us. Go right there from the train when it gets in. We'll have a regular old-fashioned Tri-Circle payday like we used to in Range City. Get some new clothes and a hat—anything you want and don't worry about where it comes from because I've got a lot of back pay coming. Tell the kids hello for their pa and I'll bet you're just as pretty as you always was. I'm crazy to see you, Your loving husband Jax.

Clara heard him coming down the hall from the elevator, knew it was Jax as soon as the elevator door shut. Thumpa. Thumpa. She'd been sitting on the bed. She got up and dusted down the front of her skirt, smoothing the creases. Her hands looked pretty bad in spite of the lotion and the red nail-paint. Washing so much. She bent forward and looked at herself in the mirror, fluffing her hair. Sun-bleached hair. She wasn't young any more. Two nights in a day coach showed in spite of rouge and powder. She wished she had young Clara to do her face for her. Young Clara was good at it. All the youngsters were. Soap and water in her day and no nonsense. Thumpa. Thumpa. She put her hand on her red hat with the butterfly woven in the veil. Jax liked flossy things. Her heart was pounding and she was suddenly frightened. Right outside the door now was Jax—sixteen years she'd known him from his toes to the top of his head. Known him as a wife knows. Lived with him, slept with him, got him well when he was sick, fixed him up when he was hurt. Had Tom and Clara and little dead Andrew with him. He was hers and he was outside the door now, three years almost away from her—thousands of miles away from her and those dirty yellow dirties had changed him, hurt him, made him different for her and she couldn't

ever help it now. It was done to her Jax. White female fury burned in her breasts and her throat and blinded her. She reached for the doorknob and opened it.

"Excuse me, ma'am." Jax took off his cap and grinned. "Does a Missus Clara Jaxon live here?"

"Jax! Come in here!" She twisted her strong fingers into the cloth of his blouse and pulled at him.

"Well, good Lord a'mighty—you had me fooled—you're painted up so pretty!"

"Jax, Jax." She clung to him, pressing her face against his chest frantically, trembling into him, throwing him off balance. He thrashed with the canes and caught himself, his shoulders against the wall. "Liked to th'owed me." He got his arms around her and kissed her, held her up and pressed his lean cheek tight against hers. "All doused up with perfume, too, *I'm a son of a gun.*"

"Jax, Jax!"

"Yes, Honey—I know, I know. Don't talk. Don't try to say it. It'll be all right in a few minutes." He held onto her with his big hands, pressing her tightly under the arms, bringing himself back to her with a desperate masculine insistence. He was still Big Jax no matter what had happened. He had to be for his self-respect. And she knew he had to be—wanted him to be. Pale under his tan. Drawn in the cheeks. Hands getting soft.

But he was still Big Jax the way he had been that first day she had seen him, so long ago. Big lanky Jax in his faded levis, horse legged and burned brown with the hairs golden on the backs of his hands and his eyes pale gray under his hat brim.

"I'm looking for Sam Osterholt. He live around here?"

"He might live around here." You pushed them off that way, strange men. Pushed them off cold before they started their tricks.

"Kinda pert, ain't you, Miss?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Jax swept off his hat and palmed the sweat from his forehead with the other hand, flicking it. Then smiled—white, bleached bone teeth.

"Kinda purty, too."

"Fresh," she snorted.

"No—you got me wrong, Miss." He shook his head. "I mean it." Seriously. And suddenly she saw that he did mean it and something happened inside of her and she was embarrassed and uncomfortable. Self-possession was gone from her and she was just new-grown-up girl again, with no assurance—no protection. New-grown-up girl with men around her knowing it and ready to go for it.

"Sam Osterholt's my dad," she said angrily. "You'll find him at the corral. I suppose you're going to work for him."

"If I'm lucky," Jax nodded. "Thanks." He barely moved, but his roan felt his will and jerked up her head and started off and he swept his hat on again with a full arm sweep and there was the cavalier in it—an ancient, easy dignity. Narrow hipped, straight backed Jax, with his long, slender horse legs and his lean, brown face. As she watched him, the ancient knowing came to her—the knowledge of women. This is the way it is—fifty go by, a hundred, and none of them are the one. And then one comes casually along, with white teeth and a smile and pale gray eyes and forevermore, he is. Even years later if you have somebody else, his memory will come back and sit there smiling on his ghost horse, sweeping his hat off. Even if he never touches you, that one is always the one that should have been.

He leaned on the corral fence with a straw between his teeth, one booted foot on the low rail and the sharp splinter of the new moon deep in his eyes.

"Clara, I'm aiming to talk plain. There ain't any man-woman chatter in me. I want to make marriage with you."

Her throat had tightened at his slow drawl. She tried to be angry, but she felt the honest intensity in him and couldn't. "I'm no better, no worse than I should be—but I never talked thisaway to another woman. Never told 'em the truth. Wasn't their business—any of them. I'll tell you whatever you want to know—always. Start askin'."

"Asking what, Jax?"

"Anything you want to know."

"I don't want to know anything."

"If you ever do—ask."

"Sure, Jax."

"Now tell."

"Tell what, Jax?"

"The truth. You're big enough. You're old enough. Have you had a man yet?"

Crimson heat surged into her throat and face and her fingers went icy cold on the fence rail. She couldn't speak.

"'Cause if you have—just tell me it all, once and quick. Like that. If I know it, I'll be it—and it won't matter. But don't lie about it to me. That's all. Don't lie. Tell me the turth—and I'll be it and it won't matter. Girls can't help it always—"

"Jax—shut up!"

He reached and clamped his hand over her wrist, turned her and looked into her face. "All right," he said, "I know now without asking, Clara. It's better not. I'm glad."

"I'm glad, too," she whispered fiercely.

"When do we go?"

"Tomorrow, Jax."

"Nope. Tonight."

"Tonight then, Jax. Without seeing Dad?"

"Ain't no sneak in me," he laughed. "Let's see him first and both get th'owed out beforehand so we can start fresh."

All of that and all of all their years were there now crowding into that garish room in the Hotel Forsberg. And the room was beautiful with it suddenly, for their separation was gone and it never had been. "Jax," she whispered, "you old fool, *we'll have a baby.*"

"I brought him a long ways," he growled. "What's wrong with having a baby?"

"Clara and Tom are all grown up!" she giggled. "It ain't decent."

"Mama—you need some rye whisky, you're gettin' coy

an' kittenish on me. Settle down. You're a something." He kissed her.

"Tell me—ever since you and me—nobody else, huh, Jax? Nobody? Not even far away from me when you're drunk?"

"Hell *no*, Clara. You got poison. It's in me for good. Always was in me."

He sent a bellboy for whisky and for ice and they had a few and the old days were back—even with the city traffic noises below them and the strange hotel around them. They could fade everything out but themselves, these two. Always could.

"Clara—does Andrew sometimes still bother you?"

She looked deep into her glass for a moment. "Cold nights," she said. "Rainy nights if I wake up."

"But he doesn't call you?"

"Not any more. Not for a long time he hasn't."

"That's good," Jax said. "It worried me when he called you. That's not right."

"I know. He don't any more, Jax. That was just me, I guess. Women are kinda crazy a little bit, always."

"I ain't forgot him, Clara." His eyes were far away. "Don't think I have, Honey. Men are crazy a little bit, too. Andrew got pretty close to me out there. He stuck—when a lot of other things faded. He was a nice baby."

"Don't do that, Jax."

"What?"

"Don't go back out there."

"Sure as hell not," he laughed. "I'm home. Don't let no one ever tell you about the South Sea Islands!"

"Jax—talk now."

"Sure."

"They hurt you bad?"

"Never felt much. I was out most of the time."

"Jax—I got to see."

"Sure—but not now."

"Just once—I have to see. Then I'll know—and it'll be me. And then it won't matter after it's me. Like we've always been."

"Old Woman—" He leaned across and kissed her. "I love you. Silly, huh?"

She shook her head. "No it ain't. Who else you know who's got it? Who kept it like we kept it, Jax? You're a—man, Jax. A man!"

He laughed and thrust himself up to his feet. "Whole, too, see? Don't ever think anything different, Clara, or I'll know! These are *my* feet, see—and *I walk on them!*"

"Jax—you never change."

"That's right, Missus Jaxon, and I'll trouble you—"

"You're just a whisky drinking fool; let go of me."

"You said you would. You promised."

"Jax—you're a wild cat—"

"Just to make sure, Honey, this time. I got a hanker—ing—"

"You sure have. *Jax!*"

Whisky always burned easily in them. Warmed them. Mellowed them. Made everything more fun. When they were first married they used to raise hell. Never got into trouble, but everybody remembered them, because they never quarrelled with each other. Just got funnier. They'd be going great guns together, passing everybody else out around them and suddenly Jax would say to her, "What's your name?"

"Belle."

"Sure as hell. I remember. You got a place over at Agua Prieta—with a band."

"That's right."

"Well look—my wife's around here somewheres." And he'd look around. "Let's get the hell out of here before she sees us."

"What's she like?"

"Shootin' jealous."

"Well come *on* then!"

And somebody'd get sucked in and say, "Jesus—that big buy just grabbed off a coosey, wait'll his wife finds out."

"You dam' fool, that's Jax and Clara. They're crazy. She *is* his wife."

When the kids came, they stuck to each other and let the rest of the crowd drift, because of the kids. But they still had their fun together. Every two or three months—off somewhere together and alone for a couple of days of quiet hell raised behind a locked hotel room door.

They were really dusted down now. Jax raised his glass. "Well, it's been very nice of you, Missus Jaxon, and I'm sorry your husband couldn't be here—but you might call up now and if he isn't home yet, maybe you could stay all night."

"You take the consequences, Bub—he's a killer diller, my husband."

He lay on the bed, letting her look. Cold sober for a flash in his mind. She put her hands out and touched his legs, gripping them tightly. "Oh, *Jax*—"

"No, you don't get it." He shook his head. "It looks bad to you. Helpless. Half a man. But I don't feel that way. I don't feel cut off the way it looks. I'm not lying to make you feel good. I'm telling you the truth to make you know, Honey. I'm still all here—all that counts—and it don't bother me much any more. It did. But it don't now. They talk to you. I listened. I got the feel of it quick. The feel of it in my mind, I mean. And as soon as I did that, I was all here again. That's all there is to it."

"Jax—those dirty yellow dirties." Her lips were pressed tight together. She shook her head, her eyes tight shut.

He laughed. "They paid off. I got plenty. Now cut it out."

"Yes, Jax. It's me now. It's all right."

"That's better, Old Girl." He put his arm around her and held her close, so he'd be there while he let his mind slip off for a luxurious stolen moment, back to Buna. A safe moment he could come right back from. "Funny," he said, "they don't stink right away. Not till they burst open. Rice eaters don't, I guess. Japs. Our boys get sweet in a few hours in that weather—green sweet. Meat eaters. And soon after, they get vomit rotten."

"Don't, Jax. Come back."

"We'll go up the Chino River, I kinda figure—you and

me. Tom may not want to come with us and Clara'll marry soon. We'll take up that old land of my Dad's and build on it and start again like we always did. I want everything to be fresh and new now. A new beginning. It's good land and we'll get a few head and we'll work it—"

"Whatever you say, Jax. Jax—" She held onto him fiercely. "You're talking just like you talked to me that first night we were married in the hotel in Range City."

"I feel like that night," he said, "good and clean and new and teamed up once more. I feel like doing big things—like work. That's all there is in life, I guess—work and a roof, three meals, and a good woman to sleep with."

"Jax," she whispered, "Dad never sent for me when he died. He never forgave us."

"Got to respect him. Hard-headed folks, those Osterholts. I know. Made up his mind and stuck to it."

"I'd do it again!" she said fiercely. "I'd walk out bare-handed just as I did. You were it, Jax. We went hungry a little bit. We had troubles and thin pickings. We had our knocks, but none of it hurt us, it made us better. It made us good inside—"

The orderlies were bringing the luncheon trays up to Ward Twenty. Pillsbury moved a chair in to help feed Meredith. Kountze sat down with Milton Halpern, to feed him. Meneilley said, "So my mind's improved. This guy from some college says there's the U.S., Russia, England and China who ought to make the peace stand up—no small states ought to be allowed to gum up the big picture, like Czechoslovakia and Rumania and—"

"He was nuts," Paskow snorted. "What about Poland—Poland was big before Germany."

"It started the war, didn't it?" Schiappas said.

"How'd it start any war?"

"By bein' there with nothin' but a lot of horse cavalry."

"In France," Daley said, "they getting two dollars and a half for a pack of Luckies. That's gratitude."

"You gotta get the *big picture*," Meneilley said. "The guy was smart."

"He was smart as hell," Paskow said. "He was a 4-F, wasn't he? Why should he worry about Poland? Ever hear of Warsaw?"

"Never," Keenan said. "Eat your soup."

"You're an isolationist, Keenan."

"You gonna take that from a Polack, Keenan?" Schiapas sat up.

"Words," Keenan said. "Always words. Trouble with this Country is we take anybody in for the price of a steerage ticket and teach them words."

"You come in the Mayflower?" Frischling asked him. "First class cabin?"

"In France," Daley said, "they paying three dollars for PX beer."

"Who's talking about France?" Paskow asked him. "This is a lecture by a professor we just heard. Did he say anything about France? Did we? So shut up about France."

"Why should I shut up about France? It's a Country, ain't it? They help us with Lafayette, din' they? I don't get it," Daley said. "It's all mixed up. Like in history when you study it—you fight somebody or you don't. This war is crazied up. England and France fighting Germany and Italy to start. So are we. France gets knocked out. England fights the French fleet. Italy gets knocked out. Now they our gallant allies. First Russia is with Germany against Poland. Then they against Germany. Finland fights Russia. Then they fighting Germany. Also Rumania and Bulgaria, whatever the hell they are. We fighting them at first. Now they our gallant allies. No organization. How do you know who does what to who and who pays how much?"

"You know who pays all right," Joe Keenan said. "Uncle Sugar Able pays, as usual. He reached for the check again."

Cancellare said, "Italian people make very good citizens here."

"Shet up. Shet up." Paskow began pounding on his tray with his spoon. "Smart apples, that's all. They prisoners of war, huh? So they take a walk to us an' they out of the stockade. Get our uniforms with 'Italy' on the sleeve, our pay, our movies, our PX, go to town—all that—and they don't have to fight. Smart apples, Wops. They be voting the straight Democratic ticket soon."

Miss Keiffer called from the passageway. "So what is this?"

"Quiet! Quiet!" Schiappas shouted. "You disturbing us, Keiffer."

Cancellare shook his head. "Is not true! Italian people, fine people. Laugh. Sing. Only Mussolini's bad fella."

"Mussolini? He's obsolete. Never heard of him."

"I was wore out all the time," Meneilley said, "running after Eyties all over Africa. They fast on their feet, *backwards*."

"We ought to have a stenographer," Keenan said, "to take notes. This ought to help Congress."

"So I come in the war because of Pearl Harbor," Frischling said, "not Germany."

"You come in the war because of a rope," Paskow told him. "It's on your neck—look."

Milton Halpern said, "Who would volunteer for a war with good sense? It would be crazy."

"So look at Milton," Daley said. "Talking."

Schiappas pointed a fork at Daley. "You open that cheap Mick monkey face of yours to Milton, I'm coming over and sew it up for you."

Frischling said, "In California, Japs take less wages than white men. They're a menace."

Miss Keiffer cupped her hands to her mouth. "Take five—everybody!" and they settled down.

"Keiffer," Schiappas muttered, "you're a Nazi. Ya paid by the Gestapo? Y' an undercover agent planning the next war?"

"Shet up about Keiffer," Paskow warned him. "She's good to her mother."

"She's interfering with freedom fam speech!"

"We should wipe out the Krauts," Meredith said. "We tried everything else—treaties—League of Nations—"

"Leave them to the Maquis and the Mockies!" Daley said and everybody laughed and his little soul was warm again within him.

"I should have fought for this." Schiappas shook his head sadly. "For the privilege of listening to Ward Twenty crap all day. Socialist, Communist, who won the war. A fine thing. *A fine thing*. Milton! Let's you and I snub hell out of all of them. We're educated."

"You can't count to ten," Keenan told him, "without going off into a spasm like a Mongoloid child."

"Say, listen, Irish," Schiappas said, "you may have got clipped by Japs in New Guinea—but don't talk to me about Mongolia, see? I been in India, Assam, Burma. I served with Chinese. I like them, see? They good Joes. *Ding How*."

"Languages," Paskow snorted. "So what's the Gummert wasting money on schools for the army for them? Tell me that."

"So maybe," Schiappas said, "if they spend enough on you, you could work up in ten years to be a dope, first and fifth."

Miss Keiffer was getting nervous. Most of the visitors came in the front way and along the corridor at the far end of Ward Twenty, the end opposite her office, because it was shorter that way, just up the stairs or up the elevator. It was almost two o'clock. She went down the Ward and stood for a moment in the other doorway, looking down the corridor. Some visitors were in already. High heels were clacking along the corridor. Old women and young women. Older men, come a long way in unaccustomed best suits, wrinkled with train travel. Not knowing exactly where to go. How to act. What they would see when they got where they were going. Tiptoeing, hats in work-bent hands. "This way, Momma—there's a nurse. We'll ask her."

All kinds. Laborers and businessmen. Good clothes

and poor. Debutantes and shop girls. Charwomen and housewives. Shell splinters hit everywhere. Fire an 88 on the banks of the Po River and the echo of it carries death to the back door of a house in Pocatello, Idaho, fear of uncertainty to a farm in Tennessee, wailing to the fourth floor of a tenement on York Avenue, and apprehension to a fish boat tied up in Key West. Rich and poor. Sick and well. Proud and humble—the echo brought them all eventually to the hospitals—to Ward Twenty.

Miss Keiffer was watching for Cissie Hantz. Cissie came almost every night and on Wednesday afternoons. Only Keiffer would have remembered that. That today was Wednesday, the afternoon Cissie had off. She saw her turn at the stairwell and start down the corridor. Cissie Hantz in a red dress with very high-heeled patent-leather slippers with white leather bows. Cissie with a ridiculous red hat perched on top of her brown hair, and a big shiny patent-leather purse, worn through at the corners. She had a little package, too—wrapped in white paper.

Eulalia Keiffer went down to meet her. There was a rest room just down the corridor. Cissie must have felt something, for she stopped when she saw Miss Keiffer and just stood there, looking helpless, not quite balanced on her high heels. Miss Keiffer took her arm and smiled. "I want to talk to you, Cissie."

Not the rest room, she thought. Women going in and coming out. Powdering and lipsticking. Toilets flushing inside. She turned Cissie and walked her back to the next cross hallway. That way she could get her to the other end of the Ward, to her office, without passing through the Ward.

"What is it?" Cissie asked.

"It's about Charlie."

"What about Charlie, Miss Keiffer?"

Eulalia took a deep breath. There were times when she hated some of the things she had to do. She had never hardened to some of them with all the years she'd had to harden in. There was just the routine for a long time

and then some case, someone, came along that broke and humanized it all—made it the first time all over again.

"Wait until we get to the office, Cissie."

"Is he bad, Miss Keiffer? Tell me. He wasn't so good last night. Is it the leg—does he have to—"

"Look, Cissie," Eulalia said, "there's something in women that makes them strong—you're a good girl, Cissie. You have that."

"Tell me." Cissie's voice was tight. "I can take it. There's only Charlie and me. Neither one of us has anyone else—no parents—only us. We can take it—"

Eulalia steered her into the back passage, pushed open the office door. "Sit down, Cissie."

"No. You tell me, Miss Keiffer. Is it bad?"

"Yes." Keiffer's lips snapped shut. She nodded.

"He's *not*—" Cissie's hands flew to her face, she dropped her purse, the package.

"Yes, Cissie."

"But how— He couldn't be! I saw him last night—"

"This morning." Eulalia sat her down. "About nine-thirty," she said, "just the way I tell you. They operated. They tried everything. He just didn't respond, dear. Sometimes it's like that and there is never any answer. It was like that with Charlie. He had enough."

Cissie drew in her breath in a low whimper. "*Oh, no. Oh, no.*" She kept shaking her head from side to side as if she were in pain. "He can't be dead. He can't be!" She was wiping her fingers together as if she would wipe all of it away, free herself of it that way. Then her crying burst through the scab of shock and for a moment she went all to pieces, wailing and sobbing like a little girl, shaking her head against it, gripping the chair arms tightly. Keiffer gave her a few drops of aromatic spirits to quiet her.

"We all liked him," she said softly. "We—"

"Oh, don't. Not now. There's no need. Could I see him, Miss Keiffer? No, I guess I don't want to," she said. "It wouldn't be Charlie. Not now. It would be something else—something I wouldn't want to remember."

Miss Keiffer took her hand in both of hers.

"But what will they do—we weren't married yet—haven't anything but a little money—"

"You don't have to worry," Miss Keiffer said. "They'll take care of everything. I'll find out and let you know everything."

Cissie nodded. "I'll have to go now," she said.

"Just sit for awhile."

"No, I can't. I'll have to go back—because I'll have to have time off in a day or so for the funeral, so I'll have to work this afternoon. I'll have to tell them, where I work—"

"I'll take you down," Miss Keiffer said, and she thought damn you, Keiffer, for letting yourself in for years of this kind of life. What a dope. *What a dope.*

"I'll want to get flowers," Cissie said, "and could I have something of his—"

Keiffer put her hand in her pocket and put a cheap, washed-gold identification bracelet in Cissie's hand. "That's against regulations—strictly—so don't tell how you got it. He gave it to you, see?"

Cissie nodded. "I gave it to him," she said. "Three years—just following—jobs near him all the time wherever they sent him. I don't know what to do now." She stood in the office, looking helpless and lost. "It just doesn't seem right, because we never wanted much—never asked for anything—and now I haven't even got—the not asking. The not wanting. I'm just alone. All over—alone—"

They were playing volleyball outside on the back lawn, with a low net. Sitting on the grass, close to the warm earth, like children playing in the sunshine. Pushing themselves around on their strengthening arms and hands. The earth felt good. It felt warm. The earth was good. You got to know that, feel it, believe it—in the Infantry. A blade of grass, a rut in a road is concealment. You can get flat against the earth and stretch your arms out and feel the whole world of it against you when they're shell-

ing. You can hold the whole world of it to you and hang on and be there as long as you hold on tight, even with the God-damned mortar fire. Once you know that, the world is yours. You live in it, sleep in it, eat in it, and die in it.

They played volleyball, yelling and frogging around. Paskow and Schiappas. Cancellare and Daley. Keenan and Frischling with that PT Corporal who was with the First Division at Gafsa.

In their red pants and jumpers. M.D.U.S.A. They were good. Team work. Paskow to Daley to Keenan at the net and over. Foreshortened game, drawn down to their own eye level. Fast and mean and furious. Hand leaps and thrust ups and murderous slams across the net. Shades of all the volleyball courts in all the cantonments the country over. Atterbury and Dix, Devens and Philips, Ord and Lee and Leonard Wood and all the rest. Shades of the long-legged soldiers who had played. Cancellare to Frischling to Schiappas and over.

They rested. "There's a gimp girl in d' Woman's Ward."

"What the hell?"

"There sure as hell *is*. A WAC corporal. Not bad looking either. Got clipped in an air raid in Italy. At the left knee."

"So how do you know?"

"So I know—see?"

"You see her? You just hear latrine rumors?"

"They told me."

"I don't want any gimp girls in mine. I want two-legged girls, long legs in nylons with high heels."

"So who's asking you what you want?"

"I'm telling you what I want. I can tell. I don't have to be asked to tell."

"A fine thing—a gimp with a gimp girl! It's a laugh. So how do you go about that? It's the details get me. The details. I don't want no gimp girls, either."

"A gimp girl would understand a gimp Joe. You could marry a gimp girl. She'd understand."

"Don't take no discount, Chum. Marry two legs. They'll unastand twicst as good."

"So I'm goin' over to see her."

"They won't let you in the Woman's Ward."

"Don't be a dope. Who's to look after a gimp girl if gimps don't? Use ya head. You got two legs you gonna shop f'a one-legged girl? Like funny. It's tough f'a woman—tougher than a man. Man's got pants to hide it. What'll a silk stocking hide?"

"You're getting soft in the head. So who wants to hide it? Everybody's in the same boat. What's to be ashamed of? You talk foolish."

"So I can see how it'll be. Run it down. What happens? It wasn't Italy, it was England. It wasn't an air raid, it was a rusty nail she stepped on. It wasn't her knee, it was her big toe. And it wasn't a WAC, it was a rumor. All this place is full of. Rumors. All the time rumors. Rumors this, rumors that."

"I don't know what you cripples are going to do, I'm going to play ball. Come on, t'row d' ball. Cancellare, get the lead out. T'row d' ball!"

In Ward Twenty, one of the Grey Ladies was reading to Milton Halpern. Meredith was using his prosthesis, practising. Picking up, putting down. Frowning, concentrating. Meneilley lay on his bed. "Frischling speak to you, Bill?"

"Sure, sure," Meredith said. "O.K. I'll call Dorothy."

"Well, call then. Schiappas and Paskow and Halpern."

"I don't know about Halpern," Meredith said. "That's a slug. How would a tomato go for a blind guy?"

"You gotta know. The kid needs it."

"Can I help it? I'm busy."

"All right. All right. Frischling just told me to remind you. You can't wait all afternoon."

"What am I?" Meredith asked him. "A pimp?"

"You'd know about that."

"Get fresh and I don't call."

"All right. Don't call. Give me the number. I'll call. What's the matter with you, you afraid of girls?"

Meredith looked at him. "You haven't seen me having many family reunions, have you?"

"Aw, don't be a jughead. You're a hero. Forget it."

"Hooks ain't so good," Meredith told him.

"Get happy."

"Not like tin feet. Shoes hide feet."

"Give me the number. We got company. Look."

Two women came in at the far end of the Ward. Came in and stopped and whispered to each other. Stout women. Middle-aged. Big legs and splayed shoes. Gloves and handbags. Hats. They walked briskly up the Ward as if they had business there, their rouged cheeks bounding slightly as they walked, their lips pursed tightly together. Meneilley could smell them before they got to him, cheap talcum powder and toilet water. They looked like women look in the mornings when they get out of Pullman cars. They stopped for a moment and looked at Meneilley. He looked back at them. And there they stood and there he lay. Looking.

"Well?" Meneilley said.

"How'd you lose your legs?" They were standing there, both of them at the foot of the bed, a little breathless, a little flushed. They had both spoken together. Their hands clasped their pocketbooks tightly. They were ready to run, but they weren't going to run. This was what they had come for and this was what they were going to get.

Meneilley lay silent, staring at them.

"It started," he said, "with simple athlete's foot. Then it worked up."

"What did?"

"Get outa here, ya fat, morbid bitch, before I call the M.P.! Ya think ya tax paying on me, ya wrong. Scram!"

The women snarled indignantly, backed away and hurried toward the door.

"Unauthorized visitors," Meredith growled.

"Let 'em have it. It's a thrill and it's free for them. I make 'em happy. It takes all kinds. I read a book by

Kraft-Something one time. A dirty book. You wouldn't believe what some people have to have for a kick."

"They ought to be thrown out on they ass."

"Throw them out, how you going to get girls in—and whisky? Don't even report 'em. Dead girls, some guys have to have."

"What do you mean, dead girls?"

"Like I said. Dead girls. You been a bellboy."

"Nobody ever called me up for a dead girl."

"In France this was—before the war," Meneilley said. "The guy kills the girl and keeps her under the hay in a barn."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"I ain't kidding you. It's in the book. A medical book. Until she gets high like Roquefort cheese. All the time he keeps going back till they catch him."

"Going back where?"

"To the dead girl in the hay."

"You're crazy."

"Did I say *I* went back! *He* went back."

"He's crazy. A dead girl."

"Sure he's crazy. That's why he did it—a feller in California did it, too. Rouged up her face and wired her eyelids open. Finally threw her out of the car on her old man's front lawn."

"It don't make sense—a *dead* girl."

"Did the two old biddies just here make sense? My legs are dead, aren't they? It's the same principle. Gee—that's kind of funny to think of, ain't it, Bill?"

"I never think of it."

"In Africa," Meneilley said, "buried somewhere. And me, when I die, buried over here, miles away across an ocean. Some day a guy looking for history digs them up with a lot of A-rab junk and they don't make sense. Two legs from Chicago in Africa. How d'y' like it? A joke on him, huh? I wonder will they bury Charlie Whitehead's leg with Charlie—coming so close like that, huh? They ought to—it's logical. It makes sense."

"They wouldn't." Meredith shook his head. "Too

practical. It ain't Army. They'd be papers to fill out. Once they amputate off Charlie's leg they got to account for it. A cop told me, once. You can't have a lot of arms and legs kicking around loose. Might be a trunk murder—so they collect them and burn 'em or bury 'em."

"Maybe he could get it back on a memorandum receipt for the funeral."

"Naw—it'd have to be a tally out—a tally out—if he's going to keep it with him in the casket."

"In a theatre of operations, it'd be easy. Everything's expendable. Not here, though."

"It's Charlie's own leg, isn't it?"

"What difference does that make? They amputate it off—it's picked up on another report."

"Maybe you're right. They'd have some cockeyed system like that. Only suppose it was in a guy's religion—so he'd be all together on Judgment Day? Maybe he could get a waiver."

"There's a lot of things in my religion the Army's been ignoring."

"Such as what?"

"Such as when do you make that God damn telephone call to Dorothy for Milton?"

"Come on. We make the call, Persistent."

Father Sheehy sat with Cancellare, and all of the goodness and all of the badness of the world seemed to be sitting there with them, separated by a thin wall. Pasquale always felt that way with a priest, any priest. That the badness somehow filtered through the priest and became good—and the badness of the world was kept from him. Brian Sheehy was of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost and he knew far places. Tanganyika and the jungle-bound headwaters of the Marguerita. Kandy and the grass villages along the Sunda Straits. Missionary turned temporary army chaplain. Box fighter turned priest. Kid Sheehy, slugging it out well in all the middleweight rings in the East until Monsignor O'Grady got him and talked his belligerent virility back into Mother Church. Father

Sheehy had never regretted it, for it was a continuing bigger fight and that's all he was or ever would be—a fighter with two ham hands and a wide, simple, brain for the understanding of the problems that beset everyone—for their solving, as well as another can solve them.

But Italians always escaped the forthright heritage of his County Waterford mind. They were Catholics but they thought differently, acted differently. A volatile delicateness, perhaps—a greater adherence to the letter of ritual rather than the strong knowledge within, of the inexorable tradition that held the mind and spirit. Lip service and conformity to the outward and visible rather than a deep and abiding love—fear of the inward and spiritual.

"My Mother since I am a little boy. She tell me stories. Always they are true to her and she makes them true to me. She want me to be a priest."

Brian Sheehy nodded. "Cancellare," he said, "a lot of people want to be priests and a lot of parents want their boys to be priests. That's why there are a lot of second-rate priests in the world."

"A lot of good priests, too, Father?"

"And a lot of bad."

"How do you be a good priest?"

"I don't *know*." Father Sheehy looked down at his old fighting hands and smiled as if he saw something amusing there. "Not by schools necessarily, not by your family wanting you to be one, not sometimes even by hard study. I don't know. But I know this—inside after awhile, you know yourself whether or not you are any good."

"It's beautiful." Cancellare's eyes were wide. He sighed in mild ecstasy with the words. "Like music, like Christmas, like lights."

"No," Brian Sheehy said, "that's only the way some people see it. It can be very seamy. Very disappointing at times. It's a hard fight in a tough ring. Cancellare—people are not very good in this world. A priest has to try to make them good, to talk them good, scare them good. Even kick them good. And then comes his own doubt sometimes. Is he good enough himself to do this?"

Wise enough? Kind enough? Maybe you should be able to see that capacity in you before you go too far—"

"Look, Father. Thees is me. Thees is how I think. I'm what you call good boy." He smiled bashfully. "I don't smoke cigarette or drink whisky. Just wine. I don't gamble or runna round with bad women—*any* women. But that's nothin, because I just never feel like any of that stuff. So how can I say I'ma good boy?" He was frowning now, caught in the mystical coils of his own introspection, working as hard at it as he'd ever worked in his life. "First I think of being priest, because my mother she talk of it so much. Then pretty soon, I think *myself*. It's wonderful thing. But when I think, I think maybe it's just pride and just pride is a sin. Maybe I'm not good enough to be a priest, just because I think I want to be a priest, huh?"

"Pasquale." Father Sheehy's voice was solemn. "I know what you are trying to tell me, but I don't know what to tell you. You must work this out somehow for yourself—over many years, perhaps. You haven't had much schooling and a priest can never have too much—"

"One year high school, then the farm, then the Army, then here."

"Yes. Now you must go back to school. You must finish your high school. Then you must go to a good Catholic college. The Army will send you. I will get all of the information and plan what you must do. Somewhere along the way, you must decide this for yourself." He smiled. "And you will. It will come to you one way or the other in a few years. You are young. You have time now and the opportunity. Take both and study and think. But remember this. It is not as your mother saw it. Not as you see it now. It is not music, Christmas, bright lights, and color. It is a lifetime of work. At times it breaks your heart. At times it makes you fighting mad. You never finish, to rest in the backwaters of contentment. You must get into life with your hands and your brain and never compromise, never go soft and easy. The Church is living. It is not the past, the Saints, the great church build-

ings—it is people. You and me and all the others that you fight for—and your worst opponent is always yourself.” He smiled. “You have yourself on the ropes now. Get off them and slug yourself.”

Cancellare looked at him steadily. “I know this, but why you say all this—I know it so much better—”

Father Sheehy reached out and touched his still chubby boy’s hand. “For today, then, I have been a priest, to you. For today, then, you see what it really is?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Walk in it then, Pasquale, and God will walk with you—for the way to the priesthood is not closed to you, my son, nor to anyone who will honestly search for it—and find it.”

The Detail was bringing in the supper trays. Keiffer was getting Ward Twenty slicked and combed and washed for the evening meal and the evening. She drove them, shoved them, kidded them on in their mild routine, ranging herself and the wardmaster Grogan—and Pillsbury and Kountze the orderlies, on her side against them, keeping the mild pressure on them as you keep it on children. Frischling, Daley, Meredith, Meneilley, Cancellare, Paskow, Schiappas, Halpern, and Keenan.

“Push ’em up, Tony!” She rapped on the washroom door with her red knuckles. “Trays. You living in there now, Paskow?”

“Please, Miss Keiffer. A man should have his privacy.”

“Schiappas—take your shower later—your tray is here. So is yours, Daley. Snap into it. Come on, Frischling. Hurry up, Milton.”

“We watching Foo Foo Dust make Milton sweet with perfume. Milton don’t like it.”

“I should have a squad car,” Keiffer said. “I should have lived right, so Ward Twenty wouldn’t have happened to me.”

“Keiffer, you shocking us! Please. No loose talk about not living right. Some things is sacred still.”

She banged a fist on the door and bellowed, “Get out

of that bathroom. Pronto!" And they came out, jockeying for position, jamming chair wheels, pushing for place, taking the passage turn in high, smelling of hair oil and soap and toothpaste. She shooped them past her with broad sweeps of both arms. "The convoy rolls! Pick it up to thirty-five and keep interval! Don't jam up and don't pass on the curves. Turn 'em over! Single file, Keenan—no column of deuces here!"

"Keiffer—you split a gut some day shouting. This a hospital not a auction sale. Rest and quiet, we need. We delicate."

Pillsbury went in to feed Meredith. Kountze went over to feed Milton Halpern.

"Milton," Kountze said, "pretty soon we start you horse-racing. Today I picked up sixteen bucks at Belmont—easy. We lay out a schedule for you and do a scientific job."

Schiappas said, "Senator, before Milton does it, he throws it in the can. Then he knows where his money is."

"He needs a hobby," Kountze said. "What's better than horse-racing?"

"Throwing money in the can is better."

"Haven't you got any romance? Any sporting blood?"

"In the can goes Milton's money, Senator."

Meredith said, "Pillsbury, you're a sad sack. All this education you've got. What are you ever going to do with it?"

"I would have had an appointment at Southwestern if I hadn't been drafted. An instructorship."

"Teaching school, huh?"

"Why, yes."

"A fine life! Spouting a lot of corny stuff from books."

"Someone has to do it, don't they?" Pillsbury smiled.

"I don't see why. What good has any of it done? Look at the world. All kinds of education the world has and all it ever does with any of it is slug each other. Science, too—and all it does is make faster airplanes."

"But some day, possibly, we may attain to a better way of living, a greater—"

"Naw," Meredith said, "only a worse one. The closer you get to other people, the more you see of them and their way—the more you hate them and like your own. Next war and everybody'll be fighting everybody else. Round robin battle royal—'cause they know each other."

Miss Keiffer stepped down to Meneilley's bed. "Your wife telephoned. She's coming up with the boy tonight."

"I told you, Keiffer, I don't want to see her. I told her. It's an act, see? It's the bring-the-Baby-to-see-Poppa act. This is no place for a kid—a gimp ward."

"You ever see this baby, Meneilley?"

"No."

"You're going to see him, then."

"Who says so if I don't want to? Who can make me?"

"I can. I don't care what there is between you and your wife. The baby isn't in that."

"There's plenty," Meneilley growled.

"Did the baby do it?"

"No, the baby didn't do it."

"You make this baby?"

"What do you think I do, Sweetheart, hire people to make babies for me?"

"Then you'll see him. Tonight. And you'll talk to your wife—tonight. You'll grow up and stop being sullen and mean—tonight."

"Keiffer—look. You believe this Florence Nightingale stuff they give nurses, huh? You bein' an angel of mercy? Keiffer, Keiffer," he shook his head. "At your age, Keiffer?"

"So?" Schiappas said. "Refinement. A social gentleman! Talking a lady's age! A fine thing. And me so carefully brought up. Butlers, Cadillacs. I should have to associate with Chicago Loopers. Milton, stop up your ears fam this Meneilley. He's a scab."

Paskow said, "Eat some more chicken king, Mister Vanderbilt. It'll only be thrown out."

"Capitalist talk," Halpern said.

"So what are you, Milton—a Communist?"

"I'm a Socialist," Milton said.

"So what's the difference?"

"You get some back from Socialism. Nothing from Communism—except to live on."

"Some what back?"

"Some of what they make you give."

"It's getting mixed. It's getting mixed. Always it gets mixed when it starts!"

"Shet up. You're a Republican, Frischling. How would you know? You're obsolete!"

"I voted for Roosevelt!"

"So a guy all his life runs a string of call girls and saloons, he gives a dime to an old lady at the end. He should go to Heaven?"

Keenan said, "sometimes it's better to keep your mouth shut and let people think you're a dope than to open it and have 'em know it."

"Educated man," Daley said. "Smart sayings."

"You got Socialism right here," Milton said. "Socialized medicine."

"Listen to Milton. Quiet! Milton's talking."

"You come in. Plenty doctors. All kinds. Specialized. All paid by the State. No chance of personal graft. No preferment of patients. They look you all over. Find out what's wrong with you, each his specialty. Fix you up—all run by the State. Socialized medicine."

"Every day for me," Schiappas said, "the socialized laboratory. They take socialized blood out of my socialized finger. They pump it out of my arms. I've given enough socialized blood to transfer half the Army."

"Transfuse," Meneilley said.

"Do what you want to do with your blood, Chicago. My blood's my own. I bled in enough bottles to float the battleship *Wyoming*—"

"Ya corrode the bottom off it—where you been, in Burma."

"They call me Sukreting Schiappas in them days. Not only I get shot, I eat bugs."

"So," Paskow said, "that's Socialism?"

"Bugs is Communism."

"Quiet! Quiet! It's all mixed up. Too many smart apples gotta talk without making sense."

"Send Keiffer to dinner, we talk women. Go away, Keiffer. Get dinner."

"With women—I'm a Communist."

"Most women are New Dealers. They rather plow it under."

"A fine thing. Always smart talk with dinner!"

Paskow got into his red jumper and his pants again, over his pajamas. "Come on, Schiap. Get Milton started. We going out on the lawn. Get a move on, Frisch."

"You got time. It's only just after six."

"I know—but I'm the nervous type. I got ants."

Schiappas got Milton up. "You gotta walk, Milton. We take a pillow in my chair for you on the grass. Here, hold your feet up. I tie your shoes."

"It ain't even dark for awhile," Frischling said. "Take it easy. You're rushing it."

"I got ants, too," Schiappas told him. "Besides, maybe we see something better than Meredith telephones for we get there early. Milton—we get a clean bandage for your eyes. Frischling—ask Keiffer—a bandage."

"What's a names, Meredith?"

"What difference it make? You know that Dorothy I know her cousin in Chi was here before? They're with her. They'll be all right."

"You coming?"

"No," Meredith shook his head. "I'm getting good practising my arms. I'm going to keep on. Independence. I'm staying in to practise."

Sometimes the girls came right into the wards during visiting hours. Sometimes one of them knew someone and brought the rest to see him and meet his pals. Sometimes

they just made a mistake and said, "Hello," and after that it wasn't a mistake. You could work it half a dozen ways. Out in the back corridors down near the ambulance entrance or up the cross passageway near the elevators to E.E.N.T. or farther back near X-Ray and Dentistry and Out-Patients, where nobody went at night except orderlies. Sometimes on the stairs. They were acrobats with wheel chairs, those girls, and a pretty swell bunch. What could they do that was better? Life is life. Young, easy American girls with slender legs and little, swaying behinds and round, firm breasts. The kind the pit of your stomach got blind aching hungry for in Italy and Africa and England and France and Australia and India and New Guinea and Iceland and Canada and Trinidad and Sicily and Assam and New Caledonia and Newfoundland and wherever else they sent you to boredom and work and killing—wherever they sent you to get clipped and to die finally yourself after all your pals died and took your own life with them so that it didn't matter what happened to you afterwards. The far places the whole world round, where voices challenged you under white, blinding moons, and in cold rain and damp sea fog, in burning suns of far-flung desert, in snow and bitter winds—voices from Brooklyn and the Carolinas. Maine voices and the drawl of Texas. The soft vowels of Virginia and the dust-bitten harshness of Oklahoma. Places where you come upon the crosses suddenly in long, skeleton rows, sometimes with dog tags tacked to them. The crosses with American names and a sort of crude, hallowed spirituality. Apthorpe, Cartwright, and Bascomb, Delamater, Heinze, and Philips. Unknown and Krantz and Unknown. Kyles, McKeldin, Scirianich, Apel, Sigel, and S/Sgt. Shapiro. Ryder, Bowerman, O'Hare, and Zimmerman. Second Lieutenant Manoel Estados and Tesnick, Kriemanski and Morgan. The long, dead roll call echoing around the world, closing off the hunger forever—the memory of long legged girls, corned beef hash with a poached egg, the feel of Christmas in the air, and the taste of smoked turkey and of Coca-Cola—the simple ingredients of patri-

otism—a fresh chocolate bar. Ice cream. The roar of a Bronx Express. Popcorn, Spearmint, and bonfire smoke in October.

Sometimes right in the wards. In the beds. Two girls sitting on one side, toward the nurse's office, laughing and talking to a pal in a wheel chair between, the other girl right in bed behind them. Only not with Keiffer. Keiffer was wise and Mahon on night duty was a kid still. So not in Ward Twenty. Besides, in the wards you had to watch it. There'd be wives and mothers and sometimes kid sisters. Only Daley had once, with the Ward full of visitors and a girl sitting right up on his bed with another girl. But Daley was a smart apple, the wrong way.

They brought their own protection and sometimes pints of whisky. So whose business is any of it? Take it or leave it. Nobody's going to squeal and there's no scandal. Was you there, Charlie? Did you leave feet behind, hands? Did you get out of it that cheap? The God-damned roaring, stinking hell of it? Can you dress yourself, unbutton your own fly, feed yourself, wipe your—

Paskow led off, rolling his chair toward the front corridor, Schiappas behind, going slow with Milton Halpern walking along, hooked into the chair back. Benny Frischling closing up the rear in his chair. "Look, Milton—get it in your mind from the start. Just step out. We ain't going to run you into anything. Step out like you always did—there's nothing in front."

"O.K. O.K. Where the tomatoes?"

"That's a kid. Enthusiasm. That's what I like!"

"Let's go."

Out on the lawns when the weather was warm. Close to the earth in the grass. Down by the laundry. Over in the bushes beside the PX. Anywhere away from the front entrance. The path lights. Everywhere—when the weather is warm.

They went down in the elevators—all four of them in one load—to the ground floor and up past the Post Office to the east entrance. Out the curving cement walk to

Maxwell Drive and across the roadway, letting the chairs down the curb, jumping the chairs up the curb—"I need a hundred hour check on this jalopy," Frischling said. "It's getting war weary"—and down to the Circle where everybody came up from the bus stop outside.

They were there already, the girls. Dorothy and Janet and Rose and Gerry. Standing there and laughing at something and then seeing Paskow and Schiappas. "Hi, Kids—how's it coming?" Giggling, walking toward them. Seeing Frischling and Milton Halpern, taking it all in their strides. Dorothy Rosso, Janet Kovacs, Rose Rapelye, Gerry Barnes.

It was like this with women, these, most women. They were heroes, these boys. Somewhere behind their laughter and wisecracks, there was a curtain they'd crawled back through, hurt and broken. A curtain that no one but they had been beyond. Maybe you'd fall for a born cripple, but that would be pity. Women could fool themselves easy on things like that sometimes—but they couldn't fool themselves on the fundamental bargains they had to strike with life. They had to get a man. Maybe they didn't think children, when they were young, except inside without knowing it. A strong man for the father—not someone with a born taint. But the instinct was there—a man, the best and strongest man you can bargain for in the market place with other women. A born cripple couldn't be that man, except through pity—but these boys were strong men. They *could* be. Double strong men. Strong enough to go through that curtain and slug it out in hell and take it. Strong enough to come back, clipped, and still take it. There was a deep fierceness in Dorothy about that. She was older and older at the game. "*They aren't cripples!* Damn you, Marylynne, *don't use that word.* Those boys at the hospital are better than any men alive. They took it. They gave. They got back. Don't go, if you don't want to. Be a *bitch*. But keep your mouth shut about cripples!"

Dorothy Rosso from Newark. Just a shade of softness at her waistline. Flabbing a little bit from late hours and too much to drink on hotel parties. You had to, sometimes, still, when they were perspiring and fat handed and fumbling. Painted and lipsticked, with deep maroon fingernails like lacquered claws. A long way on the road at twenty-four, fading a little at the edges and hating the thought of what came next. Awakening in the morning with the faint steel thread of fear drawn across her. Living each day to deny it. Remembering her mother, when she was plastered, and hating her lying denials. Green-flowered wall paper and gin and rusty bed springs. Men. Damn—how many now? How many? Forget it—there's tonight. You're alive. "You're cute," she told Tony Schiappas. "Didn't I meet you before? With Bill Meredith?"

"You sure did—but not like you're going to meet me tonight, Babe. Come on. We going to stay in the middle the road? Draw a crowd? Without selling tickets?"

"Ambitious," Dorothy laughed.

"You sure as hell right." He rolled on across the grass toward the trees, and lowered his voice. "You got a girl for my friend Milton? Bill told you when he called?"

"The one standing," Dorothy said, "with the face bandage?"

"Yea, yea. Tough deal."

"You think he'd like Janet Kovacs?"

"Which one she?"

"With the pocketbook strap over her shoulder like a WAVE, only white."

"Kinda thin." Schiappas shook his head.

"She's new. Just a kid."

"How'll she take it?" Schiappas asked. "She been here before?"

"Once—you can't get much out of her. She won't talk."

"I want Milton should have a good time, see?—this party's for Milton. I gotta keep Milton alive, see?" His voice was low and hard. "A guy gets a deal like him, he's

liable to get dead inside. You say Kovacs. I say Kovacs—only she's kinda thin."

"Maybe"—Dorothy looked down at her hands—"he won't notice it. How'll he know? What's he got to know with? Kovacs is quiet. She'll talk—make friends with him."

"O.K." Schiappas nodded. "Pass the word. Milton's got to have a good time, that's all. Anything goes, he wants. Hey, Milton, I'm backing up for you. You got unhooked, ya dope! Look—right in front of you, Milton. Meet Janet Kovacs. Janet, my particular friend, Milton Halpern."

"Hello, Milton."

"Hello."

"You want to hook into his chair or take my arm? We're walking on grass in a minute."

Milton grunted. "You take my arm. It's G.I. What have we got to lose on the wear and tear except income tax?"

"So Milton's wisecracking!"

Gerry Barnes was pushing Paskow's chair across toward the trees. Rose was walking along beside Benny Frischling. Schiappas dug Milton's pillow out from under his and tossed it to the Kovacs girl. She sat down on the grass with Milton and looked at him. It was funny, just sitting there and looking at a fella's face when he couldn't look back at you. Frightening. It made goose pimples, wondering what was going on inside in the darkness. Paskow hoisted himself out of the chair and down to the grass. He had a blanket and rolled in the blanket he had a bottle.

"Where you from?" Frischling said to Rose.

"St. Jo, Missouri."

"I know St. Jo. Kansas City better. You're a long way from home."

"I've been to Kansas City," she said.

"I bet you have," he laughed. "Ever been to California?"

She shook her head. "I'd like to go—to see Hollywood."

"Ya nuts. What's to Hollywood?"

"Actresses. Moving pictures. The studios."

"Lady," Frischling said, "it's a phony—"

"Listen to Clark Gable talk," Gerry laughed.

"I been taken for Clark Gable."

"By who?" Schiappas asked him.

"By mistake," Rose said.

"You on my side or his?"

Paskow grabbed Gerry's wrist. "What's a matter? Sit down. Relax." She sat down. He had the bottle open. "Have a drink?"

She giggled, "I get wild if I do."

He passed her the bottle. "Get wild. Who cares? Get wild." She drank, gagged, and held the bottle out to Tony Schiappas.

"Milton," Tony said, "have a drink. Here, Janet—give my pal Milton a drink. Milton gets wild, too. He's a tanker."

"You got a tanker patch, Milton?" Janet smiled. "I'm saving patches. I got a lot. All kinds."

Milton took a drink. "Sure. I'll give you a patch. Second Armored. Best division in the Army. Remind me, Schiap."

"I sure as hell will. You having a good time, Milton. *Don't say it!*"

Frischling lay down and put his head on Rose Rapelye's lap. "All the comforts of home in St. Jo, Missouri."

Rose laughed. "Where you from in California, Benny?"

"A boat."

"What do you mean—a boat."

"Just that. A boat," Frischling said. "I'm a fisherman. Tuna. Ever been on a boat?"

She shook her head. "I'd like to go."

"Maybe I'll take you."

"Like so much."

"Boats are good," Frischling said. "Sea boats. Not them glass yachts rich guys have. They're a laugh. Me—I go anywhere. Any weather."

"You should a gone in the Navy, Benny."

"I couldn't. Besides, tin cans."

"What do you mean, tin cans?"

"Tin cans," Frischling said. "That ain't my kind of boat. Me, I got a good boat—only I sold her. The *Sally K.*"

"Who's she?"

"It's just a name. It was on her when I bought her. Bad luck to change names. I been all the way to Mexico in her. Mazatlán and Guaymas and Acapulco."

"Ya kiddin'."

"I'm telling you," Frischling said, "and I'm going again, some day. Maybe to Australia—the South Seas—all over—"

Rose looked at him in the gathering darkness and something got very tight and small in her throat. "Hey," she said. "The bottle."

Milton sat with his back against the tree. The whisky was warm and comfortable within him and he could smell Janet Kovacs next to him. Funny how good he could smell lately. Perfume, with a warm woman smell under it. He wished he could put his hand out and touch hers—to feel closer. To belong in the world.

"What do you look like?"

"Not so much, Milton."

"Go on. Tell me. Let yourself go. You can get away with murder."

"Why should I want to?"

"All women want to. It's a chance of a lifetime."

"Don't be like that, Milton. I got brown hair. And sort of brownish eyes and I guess I'm kinda thin," she giggled, "maybe in the wrong places."

"Fat girls," Milton snorted, "I don't like. Klucks. You got a nice voice."

"Sure—like a fog horn."

"I ain't kiddin' you. I like it. Where you from?"

"Toledo."

"Where's that?"

"How do you like that? A big town like Toledo. You New Yorkers got some nerve."

"I ain't from New York. I'm from Brooklyn."

"There'll always be a Brooklyn and Brooklyn shall be free," she giggled.

"Touch my face," Milton said.

"Sure, Milton." She put her hand flat against his cheek, holding the warmth of it there for a minute, then wiping it gently under his chin, trailing her fingers against his neck. "I like you, Milton."

"You don't have to kid me."

"I ain't kidding you, you're nice."

"Yeah," he said, "I must be. You been in this racket long?"

She didn't answer him for a moment. Then she said softly, "Not long."

"Tell me."

"What for, Milton?"

"I want to know. That's what for."

"It happens. That's all," she said. "It ain't too bad." Her mind raced back swiftly through all of it and there it was, all of it right there with them and it wasn't too bad. A little frightening when you were alone at night and couldn't make head or tail out of where it was going. But not too bad—

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"Go on, you're kidding me."

"I'm eighteen, Milton."

"How many years ago?"

"I'm not lying. Why should I lie? I was eighteen last month. Be nice, Milton. Don't be like this," and she put her hand on his face again.

"It dark yet?"

Nerve chills raced in her wrists and armpits. "Not yet, Milton," she said.

"How's about the bottle then? Hey, Schiap. The bottle."

Paskow looked at Gerry. "You're stacked, Kid. You got a good overall design. The Army accepts you. You want an inspection stamp?" and he kissed her neck, under the ear.

"A fast worker. Hey, Dorothy! This Terrible Ivan's a fast worker."

"Time and a half for overtime," Paskow told her. "Where you from?"

"Philadelphia."

"Like so much," he said. "Everybody's from Philadelphia but me. I'm from Centralton, see. I been to Philadelphia, but I'm not from it. Where were you from before Philadelphia?"

"For a time, Haskinsville."

"A coal miner, too." He laughed. "What's a matter, you on strike? Come here."

Gerry said, "Don't get previous, Ivan, this ain't a football game. Don't snatch for it; it ain't polite."

Paskow said, "I like you. You talk back. I hate dumb women. You got character. Come sit on my stumps and tell Poppa how you first went wrong."

Gerry said, "You murder me. You're funny. Ha. Ha. You're a wit—a half-wit. Hey, Rose, look what I got. A bright boy. A funny boy. Funny in the head. Don't be a maunder, Ivan—you think I want to look like I been through the wringer?" He had her flat on the grass, leaning over her on one elbow, breathing in her face.

"You goin' through the wringer," he said. "Relax and enjoy it."

"It ain't dark enough—"

"Quiet!"

"Take it easy," Schiappas told him. "Gerry's right. Wait it out a bit till it gets dark."

"Who's doing the waiting, you or me?"

"Talk about art." Schiappas flicked his cigarette ash with his little finger. "The higher things of life. Like Dorothy and me. We refined. We ladies an' gentlemen, ain't we, Dorothy?"

"We sure as hell are," she said. "Pass me the bottle."

"So take five," Paskow told Gerry and he rolled over on his back. "Everyone runs my life but me."

"You nice now," Gerry said. "I like you this way."

"So I don't get it," Paskow said. "I don't *never* get it. A girl's stacked—a guy goes for her. That's a compliment. So she's insulted. A girl gets a swell dress. A guy wants to rip it right off. That's a compliment. That's success. So she's insulted. Does it make sense? Does any of it make sense? There ought to be laws—a spade's a spade. Guys go for girls that got it. That proves they got it. That's success. So they're insulted. Phooey. I'm a bachelor."

"You're a bachelor for five minutes, Everready. I snap my fingers, you come back. The bottle. Terrible Ivan needs medicine."

"Is that so, Haskinsville? When I need medicine, I ask. Only one medicine I need. When you ready, prescribe, Babe. Geez, ain't the stars pretty tonight. You ever look at the stars, Schiap? I useta always look at 'em in Africa. They look older in Africa than they do in England. Older in England than here. In Africa, they cold and far away like diamonds. Here they like kid's toys. You believe people live in them, Gerry?"

"Only Mars."

"That's the funny papers."

"Don't be a dope. They got canals in Mars like Panama. Like Sault Ste. Marie."

"You been in Panama?"

"No."

"How do you know then?"

"I ain't been to Mars either. It's in a book."

"Always everything in books. It's dumb. The whole world—and all of it in books. Dumb. Writing. Not pictures. Should be pictures, so you could learn everything fast. Schiap! We getting refined. We talking higher things," Paskow called.

Schiappas lay close to Dorothy on the grass. It was quite dark now except along the paths where the lights were and in the windows of the buildings behind. There was laughter far down the lawns and the sound of footsteps on the cement paths. A car motor, and gravel sighing against tires.

"It's funny," Schiappas said. "Milton, he's up and down. Sometimes depressed. Sometimes happy. You can understand that, can't you?"

"Sure," she said. "Wouldn't you be, too? Everybody's like that, even if they're O.K. Up and down. It's human."

"But Bill Meredith—he ain't half as bad off as Milton. Just arms. He's happy all the time. Way up in the air. Too happy. He's got us stopped. It ain't right to be that way. Maybe he blows out at the top some day."

"Maybe," Dorothy said. "A fella tells me you're a little cracked or you ain't. Everybody, that is. Something like this happens like to Milton and he ain't cracked so it can't crack him further. He comes out of it. But it happens to a guy with a little crack, it widens the crack and he blows with it."

"That's it, I guess. You know I love Milton, Dorothy. You know how I mean that—not queer nor anything—but deep down I love him. I love Lootenant Lucas, almost like that. A polite, educated kid, Lucas, but always decent and laughing. And he's a killer, the lootenant—a real killer, hard as nails, afraid of nothing. I cried two days after I bury him. Nerves I guess. Tears just run out. I couldn't bury him deep. Out where I was they was jackals. I sat up to club 'em if they came fer him. I cried when I had to go away. I guess they got him—but it was just nerves. That way, I love Milton."

"Shut up, Schiap," she whispered and he flung his arms around her suddenly and there was that between them that there is sometimes. And after awhile he said, "Geez, Dorothy—like you meant it!" She nodded fiercely in the darkness. "I did mean it," she whispered. "That was real—and for free. You do something to me."

They had all crawled out from each other in the darkness. A little at a time, widening their circle for privacy. Drawing away. Man, woman.

Benny Frischling said, "You Jewish, ain't you, Rose?"
"Half."

"Don't be ridiculous. You either Jewish or you ain't. Not half. Not a quarter. You got Jewish blood, you're Jewish."

"My father was Jewish. My mother was Swedish."

"Ain't often Jewish girls—"

"Ain't often Jewish girls what?"

"How'd it happen?"

"How'd what happen? You getting personal?"

"Yea." His voice was hard. "I wanta know. Tell me."

"So what's to tell. It happens or it don't happen."

"It shouldn't happen to a Jewish girl. I been fighting for Jewish girls, see? That's my personal war, get it? All them they tied up and forced and threw out on the pile after. Jewish girls are brought up right. They don't play around with it. They got real virtue. They got respect—"

"You're getting awful particular all of a sudden!"

"So what if I am? I'm as good as anybody. I know what they say. Always. He's a Jew but he's a great guy. He's a friend of mine, a Jew, but you'll like him. Always—a Jew, *but*. Me, I'm no buts. I'm as good as anybody!"

"Who said you weren't?"

"Nobody better. I still got arms. If I can't fight 'em I can climb 'em. How'd it happen, Rose?"

"Don't be like this." She rolled close to him. "I like you, Benny."

"Can I help how I am? You gonna tell me?"

"If you gotta know—you gotta. It was the kid next door in St. Jo. Romantic, huh? A towhead kid with pimples, Benny. Up in the attic. I'm fourteen. But I got bad luck. I catch a kid. So I know I can't tell and I beat it. What's to do?" she shrugged.

"Where's the kid?"

"Adopted."

"And you still at it?"

"I worked for a time. Waitress. Laundry. I took a beauty shop course. But they know. Men know. They're always after you. I was even a welder. Worked up at Curtiss-Wright in New Jersey. Then I came here. I'll work again. This is just between times. But sometimes it's fun Parties and all. And it's fun here."

"You ought to stop, Rose. There's no future. You'll get a disease."

"How do you like that?" she laughed. "Benny the Reformer."

"I'm serious."

"You afraid I got a disease now? Is that it? You get me all the way up here to tell me this?"

Suddenly he said, "I don't want it. Just like that, I don't want it. Not from a Jewish girl." He sat up. "It ain't a disease. Nothing. It's principle. I been fighting for this. Maybe I'm screwy. Maybe I'm cracked wide open. Maybe I belong in Ward Thirteen with the Psychos—but I don't want it from a Jewish girl, Rose." He held onto her hand tightly. "You gotta understand that somehow. It's deep principle—that's all."

She snatched her hand from his and got up quickly. "You're lying! You hurt there, too, maybe." Maybe you got a disease yourself. For me—go to hell," and she tossed her head and walked off quickly toward the pathway.

Benny lay there for awhile, his hands under his head, looking up at the tree branches and the lightsome sky beyond. You're a fool, Benny. A dope. Go on—go back where you belong, you thinker, you stinker. There ain't no sense to you, talking yourself out of a bit of loving, making her feel bad.

A good night for a fly in. Gliders up there. Dark gliders. Thousands of them, two by two with the blue blobs of the tow ships' exhausts ahead, all the long nylon ropes snaking back into the darkness. Ahead somewhere, the jumps to secure the field. Geez—that was great stuff. A great way to go to war. I wish't I could have had one more

jump before it happened. Rip Cord Benny Frischling. Go on back to the Ward, you killer, and listen to the Lucky Strike Hour. Thabidlumfydlumfydlumbidlum—*sold American!* He got up into his chair and turned it around. Somewhere there in the darkness was Paskow and the Gerry dame, Schiappas and Dorothy, Milton and the thin one, To hell with it. And he rolled back across the lawns to the path. Across Maxwell Drive to the entrance. Up in the elevator. Back to Ward Twenty.

Paskow lay beside Gerry. "You sure as hell something when you get going."

"I been around, Ivan."

"You sure as hell have. Let's have another drink. Let's have a flock of drinks. Where's the other bottle? Whee—I been had. I feel good. I got no taboos wit youse!"

"Ivan—it's almost nine o'clock. They'll be coming for you. They'll chase me."

"Hey, Schiap—let's make a night of it. Let's make a night of it. Let's go the hell A.W.O.L. What can they do?"

Schiappas and Dorothy came over. Schiappas laughed. "Lookit me. How can I fall down? I'm down. So a few drinks and I fall down. *Further*. How do you like it? Dorothy, you feeling yours?"

"I'm feeling everything—but I don't want to get run out by the M.P.'s. There's a back way down by the heating plant—"

"Where's Frischling and Rose, they gone?"

"Shut up—you talking too loud. M.P.'s got flash lights—"

"Where's Milton and the Bean Pole? They all go off? A *fine* thing."

Paskow said, "One more drink. A dividend. Gerry—you wild yet—you calmed down?"

"We get out the back way—we cross the road and sit in the woods awhile. We get stinking. I'm stinking now. We get stinkinger. Look—I'm a frog. Oonk, ooonk!" Schiappas raised himself on his hands and flopped, raised

himself and hopped. He climbed into his chair. "You think Frischling took Milton? We can't leave Milton, Ivan."

"You making noise for a platoon. If he's here, he heard you. He was right there by the tree. The pillow's gone. Benny must have took him. Come here, Wet Deck, and push. Turn 'em over. We roll."

"Bless all the Sergeants and W O Ones.

Bless all the Corporals and their bastard sons."

Miss Mahon came on duty at seven o'clock. She checked Eulalia Keiffer out and took over Ward Twenty for the night hours. From the passage, as she came on, she caught a quick glimpse of Joe Keenan on his bed, but he didn't see her and she didn't go in to him. New resolution, born of sleepless hours. From now on, he is just a patient. This is utter nonsense and it's despicable. You are behaving like a—like a common woman. Like something even worse. You're doing it because it fascinates you and frightens you, with no thought of what it may be doing to him, in spite of his laughter. It's beastly of you and it has to stop—*now*.

She unlocked the medicine cabinet and checked evening medication. She checked the Ward list, sitting prim and straight backed at her desk. Jaxon, three-day pass. Everybody else in. Suddenly she saw the notation after Charlie Whitehead. For a moment she thought it must be a mistake. She was young. Then she knew it wasn't and she was desperately sorry in a quick wave of feeling.

There was a child's voice in the passage outside the office and the tap of knuckles on the door panels. "I'm Mrs. Meneilley. Is it all right for me to go in and see my husband?"

Miss Mahon nodded. "What a nice boy." She smiled and reached out to touch the youngster's chubby arm. He drew in his arms and legs and shrank into his mother, staring at Miss Mahon stolidly, his big eyes and his pursed mouth sunk in the folds of his baby face. "Go 'way."

"Is that nice, Ralphie?" Mrs. Meneilley said.

"Bad," Ralphie told her emphatically.

"No, she's not. She's the nurse. She's good and she likes you. Be nice, Ralphie."

"No," he said.

Miss Mahon laughed and went into the Ward. Purposely she avoided looking at Joe Keenan as she led the way down to Meneilley's bed. "Meneilley—your wife's here and the baby."

Meneilley rolled over and faced them. He took off the radio earphones. "Hello."

"Hello, Ralph," his wife said.

Miss Mahon left them and walked back, raising her eyes to meet Joe Keenan's. He just lay there watching her for a second, then he dropped an eyelid in a slow wink and she smiled self-consciously and half raised a hand in an impersonal gesture and went on back to the office. That's the way, from now on. Your knees are shaking, you fool. For heaven's sake, Patricia—grow up!

Geraldine Meneilley stood there, holding the baby in her arms. She looked awkward with him, a trifle embarrassed. A grown woman holding a doll that she had dressed up especially for the occasion, as she had dressed herself. She had Ralphie in a pale blue woolen knit suit with a little round hat to match—a hat that had worked on his head until it was up in front and up on one side, making him look not too bright as he stared at the strange man on the bed. Geraldine Meneilley didn't know anything about clothes except what she saw in the magazines and in the newspapers. What "they" were wearing, she wore, regardless of what, why or what time of day it was. She was in a rumpled gray suit with a white pin stripe, with a sleazy pink blouse and a pink jabot cascading down the front and her ridiculous hat had shiny black oilcloth worked into it. Her slippers were gabardine and a compromise between a high-heeled slipper and a walking brogue and not a happy compromise—just one of those gambles you bought for three fifty and no shoe ration coupon.

"Put his hat on straight," Meneilley said, "or take it off him. It makes him look dopy."

Geraldine dabbed uncertainly at Ralphie's hat. All of her life when people told her to do things, she moved at once in a vague, hopeful daze to get them done so that people would stop telling her to do them and leave her alone. She had come tonight with Ralphie because her aunt had told her to come with him. Take the baby. Let him see the baby. That'll let him know which side his bread is buttered on. You're going to have a hard time no matter which way it comes out—but they take care of wounded veterans—pensions and all that—and you can't afford not to think of that side of it, too.

Only Geraldine Meneilley didn't think of any side of it very much. Meneilley was sore at her. He'd always been sore at her off and on ever since he had married her. Between runs, he always wanted to lay up at home. Slip-pers and rye and the sport sheet. Like all men, so when he was out on a run, she went out. Before the baby came, that was. And then, almost three years apart. Then he was back, this way—and somehow all over again, the appalling business of conforming to each other was thrust upon them once more only it was much more complicated now. The baby, Meneilley this way. Those lousy letters.

"So you brought him," Meneilley said. "I knew you would sooner or later. Put him down then. Let's see him. Pull up a chair for yourself," and he held out his hands to the boy.

Ralphie hung there on his mother's arm, undecided, his eyes wide in the fat rolls of his pink cheeks, looking the whole situation over with the grotesque appearance of great wisdom. "So you're a comedian?" Meneilley said to him. "Come on, Fatso."

"He's not too fat."

"I wouldn't know. You wouldn't, either."

"I got a book on it."

"All babies I ever-saw were fat if they were healthy."

"The book says he's all right. So does Dr. Grosbeck."

"He looks all right." Meneilley snapped his fingers.

Ralphie moved one foot and one hand tentatively and hauled them back at once. "Man," he said.

Geraldine Meneilley said, "Daddy."

Ralphie said, "Man."

Meneilley said, "He's dopy."

"He's not dopy."

"Well, he acts dopy."

"All babies act that way. What do you expect? That he'll just walk up to you at two and a half, hold out his hand and say, 'Hello, Pop?'"

"Don't be funny. Put him down. I want to see him close. Hey—Ralph—listen," and he held the radio ear-phones out to the boy until they were close enough to his ear for him to hear the music. Ralphie reached for them, looked cross-eyed at them and drooled slightly, blowing a tentative bubble in the drool.

"That's got him. Now leave him sit on the bed. Take your hand away. Go get a chair for yourself." Meneilley leaned back against the pillows, his eyes on the boy, watching him, looking him over, and he knew suddenly that the boy was his. Knew that he'd always known it—in one of those clear flashes people sometimes get of their own minds.

"You feeding him right?"

"He looks all right, don't he?"

Meneilley unstrapped his wrist watch and dangled it in front of his son. Ralphie reached for it and put the buckle in his mouth. Gradually Meneilley teased the little boy up the bed to him. "Smart kid. Husky, too. Lookit his chest—and his arms. Lookit his fists." He shadow boxed Ralphie with his fingers, got him giggling and swinging back, trying to catch the finger. He stood him up on his stout little legs, running his hands down the boy's fat calves, his thighs, holding his feet in both hands. "This kid don't go to no war—ever," he growled suddenly. "Not a chance. Nobody gets him, see? This kid has his life. No butcher shop for him." Ralphie watched his father's face and drew back slightly from the shadow that lashed across it.

"Don't frighten him, Ralph."

"I'm not frightening him. Don't act as if I was poison. You brought him. I didn't ask you to. Now he's here, I'll handle him, see? I'll be out soon. I can get a job, in spite. I ain't going to live on no pension the rest of my life. I was a good driver—clean record, see? All the way through. I'm studying traffic management right now on my own. Clipped out an ad for a course and sent for it. I'm going right back to Overland-Cushing as soon as I get out. Start maybe as an inspector and go right up the ladder. I buy this kid, see, Geraldine? He's mine. I like him. He's a Fatso. He's got a punch. Never mind what I wrote you about him. I know now."

Geraldine sat with her hands folded tightly in her lap, staring at her chipped fingernails. You couldn't keep your nails decent, washing all the time. "I tore up the letters—all of them. You could have figured it out for yourself if you'd taken the trouble. You didn't take the trouble, that's all. You're always that way—impatient, flying off the handle. Always fighting me."

"You're going to break my heart. All I was talking about was Ralphie being mine. We haven't gotten around to all the running around with everybody you've been doing since, waiting for your loving husband to come home from the war. But we're going to get around to it."

"I suppose you didn't go out with girls?"

"Listen, I'm not talking about a few drinks and a dance now and then when you're lonely. You know damned well what I'm talking about."

"No I don't." Her voice was sullen. "Somebody has been writing you a lot of dirty rotten things about me—or maybe you're just letting on they have. I don't know which—but it just seems too bad—that's all. Too bad."

"I suppose this Gilhoolie didn't want to marry you at one time?"

"How could he marry me? I'm married to you."

"I didn't say he could. I said he wanted to. And I suppose you wouldn't have married him"—he snapped his fingers—"like that—too—if the telegram you got said I

was knocked off, not just wounded. Don't think you got away with a thing, Kid. I got all of it."

"What did you get?"

"It don't matter now," he told her, "but I got it and I got enough so that any time I want to break the contract, I can break it, see? But I'm not breaking it, yet. And you're not breaking it either. I keep this kid. Come hell or high water. Soldiers' and Sailors' Act. I'm a wounded veteran. Nobody sues wounded veterans and gets away with it. Not even a woman. The Vets are going to run this country for fifty years to come, just as soon as they get organized. The politicians are already sucking on them, you'll see."

"What are you talking about, Ralph?"

"The kid here. I'm going to keep him and you're going to keep him. I had a stepmother and I know what they're like. He don't get one—or a stepfather either."

"I don't want him to have one."

"But you did. You didn't even think about it, only yourself and your good times. And you're only saying that now because this Gilhoolie dropped out of the picture."

"He was just—a friend."

"I know all about friends like Gilhoolie," Meneille told her. "They had a field day while the Army was away. Good pay and a safe job and the pick of the women. So did the women. So did you. And it may be that you can't quite get the memory of it out of your mind. But you will."

"Ralph—you oughtn't to talk like this."

"No—I should accept it. All of it. My legs, too—and just be glad I'm alive. Well, I am glad—but I don't accept any of it. I just go on from there and make my plans."

"Who wrote you all these things? Show me the letters if it isn't all a lie."

"You don't think I'm trying to make up with you—or thrash it out—or get an explanation, do you?" he laughed. "Because I'm not. I'm just telling you where we go from

here. That's all. You're going to settle down now. You're going to raise this kid right the way he ought to be raised. You're going to move away from your aunt's, see? So you'll stay in nights and look after him yourself. And after I get out, you'll look after me. You'll cook and clean and keep the house right. I'll be in—all the time to watch that you do. I'll always be in, from now on, except when I'm working. Nobody's going to blow a car horn at the curb for you any more—nobody's going to call up and get you out on a party. You bought it and from now on out, you're stuck with it!"

She sat there very still, watching his eyes. The rouge on her lips was stark in the paleness of her face. Ralphie was coiled down in his father's arms, gone suddenly to sleep with the fat of his face pinching his eyes and his wet little mouth shut. Geraldine leaned toward him and wiped his mouth with the hem of her handkerchief.

She said, "Ralph—you're pretty bitter—you better get over it somehow. It isn't going to do you any good to go on this way."

"Never mind how I go on," he said. "Just get the idea of how *you're* going on. That's all. Because that's the way it's going to be. Maybe we can make something out of it someday. Maybe we can't but anyway—that's the way it's going to be. You can take him now—but bring him back. Tomorrow, maybe. Maybe it's better in the afternoons. But bring him back."

Geraldine reached for the baby and lifted him up against her without awakening him completely. She stood there for a moment uncertainly.

"Good night, Ralph."

"Good night," he said.

"No." Milton shook his head. "I don't want another drink. Yes, I'm sure. Because you don't take any. All you do is put the bottle to your mouth and pretend."

"How do you know, Milton?"

"I don't know how I know but I know. Where's everybody gone?"

"They're right around. They've just moved away a little bit."

"Why are you sitting with me?"

"I like you, Milton."

"You don't have to sit with me."

"I can if I want to, can't I?"

"I'm going in soon. Back to bed."

"Don't go, Milton. It's nice here. I like the night time and trees and the grass and the outdoors. It smells good and clean. Don't go in, Milton."

"I have to soon."

"Milton—would you like to kiss me?"

"What's the good?"

"Kiss me, Milton." She put her face close to his—pressed her cheek to his cheek, kissed him. Suddenly she felt his scalding tears, wetting him, wetting her, soaking his eye bandage.

"Oh, don't, Milton. *Please*, Milton," she whispered, holding him tightly, feeling the deep and silent sobs tearing at his chest. "Don't cry." But he just sat there rigid, sobbing, unable to stop the muscle spasm that made him. She could hear Frischling and Rose having an argument. She could hear Schiappas and Dorothy somewhere behind her under the hydrangea bushes. Hear Paskow and Gerry. She held Milton tighter. "Don't, Milton. Don't."

He pulled away from her, drawing his legs in, getting to his feet by pressing his back against the tree and levering himself up. She stood up with him, pressing close to him. "*Milton*."

"Leave me go," he said hoarsely. "I gotta go in."

"No, Milton. Listen to me. You've got to understand. I like you. You're nice. It ain't because—of *anything*. I been happy sitting here with you. Real happy. Honest. When I came, I didn't know how it would be. I was a little frightened, I guess—maybe bashful. But I'm not now. Don't call Schiappas. Sit down. Here—let's go down the lawn to those other trees. See—down there." She took his arm. For a moment he held back, then he walked with her, awkwardly, as if it didn't matter. As if

nothing mattered. Stupidly almost—and sat down again when she told him to. She held his face in her hands. "Milton," she said, "just let me do what I want to do. Here, Baby. Put your head here. Relax, Milton. Stretch out." She stroked his face with her fingers. "Don't talk, Baby—don't say anything—I know, Milton—I know what's on your mind. Don't worry—I'll do everything—there, Milton, *there!*"

He lay for a long time on his back with the sky of darkness above him. One with his own darkness. Funny how that was. It always seemed better at night. That's why he lay awake so much in the Ward at night and slept in the daytime. But out here it was different. In the Ward there were other people, not a part of him. Out here, he was a part of all of it. The quietness, the vast completeness. A part of it without asking to be, without trying to be. Janet lay quietly against him, coiled up to him, an arm thrown over him. Schiap and Paskow were calling his name. They sounded a little tight. Milton raised his head but Janet put her fingers on his lips. "Don't answer, Milton. I'll take you back when you have to go."

"Maybe I have to go now. What time is it?"

"It's early."

"They're going."

"Let them go."

He lay back again and turned his face sideways into her hair. "Tell me," he said.

"Don't ask it, Milton. It ain't important. It ain't much."

"Tell me anyway. Somehow I gotta know."

"O.K., Milton—but you won't understand any of it, because I don't myself. It's crazy all over. I work at a Coffee Pot in Toledo. Last year 'only. The fella who owns it ain't young any more but he's always making wisecracks and passes at me. Fresh. Most of the time I can slap him off. But he don't stop. I know and I don't know, because I never have—you believe that, Milton?"

"Go ahead. I'll tell you after, what I believe."

"Gee, Milton, you're bitter."

"So what? So I'm bitter. So go ahead."

"I burn myself, Milton—on the griddle—*bad*. I had to go to hospital with it and get operated. He sent me on compensation."

"So what?"

"So when I burn myself there's nobody in the Coffee Pot. It's my hand, all over the palm and the wrist and the fingers. Burned crisp. He puts butter on. He calls on the phone for a doctor. I hear him call. I'm inside and that's the last I hear. I'm passing out. He comes in and catches me as I'm falling. There's only the table. After I came to, I knew what he's done while I'm out."

"*What's* he done?"

"I'll tell you. Listen. He gets me into the hospital and for six weeks they fix my hand. Nearer eight, I guess. Operate and all. Graft it." She held it out as if for him to see. "It's just like new, Milton. Only it gets very red when it's cold and there's one little place at the wrist that itches sometimes."

"So go on."

"Well, at times I think I'm wrong in the hospital. I try to kid myself that way. But I know I'm right. So I'm frightened I'm going to have a baby. Dumb. I didn't know. Except what you learn from girls. He comes to see me all the time. He's not bad that way—just the other way. Like most men. We don't talk about it. Then I get out and he gets me a room near the Pot—"

"The bastard."

"No. Don't get me wrong. I don't like him, but he was good in his way. He could have dropped out of the picture—"

"The bastard."

"All right, Milton."

"Go on with it."

"Well," Janet said, "I ask him. And he admits it. So it's done, Milton."

"So you keep on with him?"

"For a few months," she said, "still not understanding—"

"Understanding what? You're sleeping with him, ain't you?"

"Never like it sounds. Never all night. And pretty soon I'm getting nervous all the time and crying to myself for nothing. Always upset and getting mad quick."

"You have a baby?"

"No, Milton. You'll see why. Gee, I was dumb," she laughed. "Well, I had some money saved so I beat it. New York first. Then Memphis for a war job and after awhile here to try to join the WAC's. I couldn't pass the physical. My lungs aren't strong. Well, I met Dorothy where I was working and I know what she is, but I like her. She's straight, Dorothy, and a good friend. One night I'm out with her and we meet a couple soldiers from Claiborne. Nice kids. Mine and I get talking and fooling around and when he gets all excited he's still nice and he's a soldier maybe going to get killed and I figure what have I got to lose now, and I'm still sore at that Greek even if he was good to me after, and maybe I figure I can wipe out the memory, so I give—Milton—and then I find out. Gee, did I find out. He liked to kill me, the soldier."

"What do you mean, he liked to kill you?"

"Milton—believe it or not I'm still a virgin and all the time thinking I wasn't. Gee was I dumb! The soldier wanted to marry me, but I wouldn't let him. He stayed A.W.O.L. until I sent him back. I didn't like him either."

"You're crazy!"

"I told you I was."

"You see him again?"

"No. All the time he wrote. I wrote some. Then he went overseas. A long time ago. I guess he's dead. I didn't get any more letters."

"How many since?"

"One other time. Here."

"You hang around with Dorothy, don't you?"

"So what? What would I have to lie for, Milton? You asked me. I told you everything."

"Who was it here?"

"A fella called Al. He's gone now."

"Thanks," Milton said. "I'm going in now."

"Milton!" She sat up, her hands on his chest. "You're a louse, Milton—a *stinker*. You asked me and I told you. I told you *everything*. Nobody else ever asked me. And I wouldn't tell anyone else if they did. It ain't anyone's business—"

"It ain't mine, either."

"You asked it to be yours. I gave it to you, because you asked me."

"So I give it back. Hey, Schiappas!"

"Don't call, Milton. It's late and he's gone. So is Pas-kow."

"What'd they do—go off and leave me?"

"I can take you in. They thought Benny took you. Don't call—the M.P.'s 'll come. And they'll throw me out."

"What time is it?"

"After ten."

"They ought to be looking for me. You'll catch hell if they find you. They won't let you back—"

"Milton—you don't care."

"All right. I don't care. Get caught. Look. I got an idea. Gee," he snorted, "like I can see I got it! There's a path we were on. We crossed a street from another path. The other path goes around to a door inside. Inside there's an elevator up. Take me in and ring the elevator and scam before it comes."

"Sure, Milton, if that's all right."

"That's all right."

"I'm coming back, Milton."

"O.K.," he said.

"Is that all, Milton?"

"What else is there?"

"Kiss me good night, Milton."

"Go ahead."

She kissed him.

"Look," he said. "I talked tough. Forget it. I believe you, Kid. I gotta habit talking tough."

"Milton, I told you the truth. You don't feel tough any more inside?"

"No. I feel good. Damn good. You're a good kid, Janet."

"You make me *feel* good when you say that, Milton. I guess I'm just dumb. Not vicious, just dumb," she laughed.

"You got a job?"

"Part time." She took his arm. "Don't talk any more. Down here's the path. O.K. Step down, Milton. Now we're crossing the road. Step up, Milton. There's the other path. O.K. Here's the door—"

"Ring the elevator bell and beat it."

"All right. Tomorrow, Milton?"

"Why not?"

"Good night, Milton."

The elevator doors closed above in the shaft and he felt the rush of air at his ankles as the car slid downward. The car stopped and the doors opened in front of him. "Halpern," he said. "Ward Twenty. Take me up."

"They lookin' fo you, Soldyah."

"They found me. I ain't lost." He stood silently in the car as the man ran it up again, smelling his pungent odor, his high gaminess. "Don't you go crazy, Fella—running up and down all day, all night in this thing?"

The elevator man turned and looked full at Milton. "How's 'at?"

"Up and down? No future."

"Yais suh, I guess. Here we are. I taik you down to th' Wahd. Step up—couple inches. That's it."

"Where have you been, Milton?" Miss Mahon's voice was sharp. "We've been all over looking for you. No one with you, either. Where are Paskow and Schiappas?"

The bed lights were out in the Ward, all but Frischling's. Cancellare had said his long evening prayers and was lying flat on his back in the ecstasy of them, slipping gradually from wakefulness to sleep with his Saints coming in close to watch over him in the night hours. He

could feel the presence of them, closing out the world from him, ringing him around. And he felt strength in himself. He would do what Father Sheehy had told him to do. He would work and study and go to a good Catholic college—and some day he would know the truth—feel it inside him. The long rows of tomato plants stretched up the sloping field away from him. The black soil was warm and soft between his bare toes—his big, laughing Mother was up there at the other end. Waiting. Holy Mary—Mother of God.

Daley lay still with the radio earphones on, listening. Chuckling silently and grinning to himself. He never got enough radio, Daley. At home, he'd always turned the radio on first, as soon as he came in. Sometimes he'd turn it on before he turned the light on. Any station. And he'd let it blast full on while he did other things. Read the paper. Talk. Eat. He never looked through the programs to pick anything. He only tuned into something else if he got a serious talk. He listened to everything and remembered nothing but an occasional wisecrack. Overseas, he got radio hungry right away and it stayed with him all the time he was gone, but he couldn't express it that way—didn't know what it was. The unctuous radio voices, manly, confidential, saccharine, and hail-fellow. The studied auditory pabulum. subconsciously all of it had become an integral part of Daley's living. He was back in it now—complete again in his escape from thinking. It had him completely, caught in the rehearsed and deftly canned fun, flattered by mock dignity of address—miles away from Ward Twenty.

Paskow's bed empty—and Schiappas'. Miss Mahon was worried. This had never happened to her before. They were combing the grounds for them. She left Milton at his bedside and called down that he had come in, but not Schiappas and Paskow.

She snapped out more of the Ward lights and went back to Milton, getting him out of his red corduroys, getting his shoes off, making him comfortable in bed. She washed his eyes and covered them with a fresh bandage.

She dabbed the lipstick off his face and neck with faint repugnance. She knew about the women who came. How could anybody have anything to do with people they didn't know? Diseases—and everything. It was unbelievable that people could. No respect for the privacy of their bodies. She washed Milton's neck and face and chest. She brushed his teeth and combed his hair back. "Where am I going now?" Milton grunted.

"To sleep. Do you want something to help you?"

"No," he said, "I'll sleep. Them pills is habit forming." He yawned. "Good night, Mahon. Thanks."

Meneilley was asleep. She could hear him snoring behind her. He'd done his work, solved his problem for the day, so he slept sprawled and uncoiled in his mind. Just as he used to sleep behind his relief driver on the long night overland runs, just as he could roll up in Africa, given the chance, and cork off in thirty seconds.

Bill Meredith had the earphones on and he was pushing at them, adjusting them with his prosthesis. "Look," he whispered across. "I'm good." He pushed the earphones off his head and hung them up.

Mahon crossed to him. "I'll take them off now."

Meredith shook his head and held his arms out straight. "No, Kid. I want to sleep in 'em. Get used to 'em. It ain't any fun having to get up at night and having to call someone to help you. Independence is my motto."

"But they'll be uncomfortable to sleep in."

"You let me worry about that," he grinned. "I was smoking a cigarette with them a while ago. Can't light it yet—but I can smoke it. Do I get a gold star on my report card?"

"You sure do," Miss Mahon smiled. "All right. If you want them off, ring—or come in."

Frischling, all through it, lay on his side in the next bed, listening to everything Meredith said, watching his face as he said it. Not moving.

"Are you all right, Benny?" she asked him. "Is there anything you want?"

He didn't answer her. He just lay there looking at her.

Is there anything I want? I want everything and I don't want it. I've always wanted everything. The wind and women and the stars and far places and the tiny islands over the horizon and the dead thoughts in books and the music that comes from violins far away. Did you ever hear Heifetz play? *Do I want anything? Do you want anything?* Starving your body from fear and prudery and cold, frightened religion? Go sleep with Keenan. See what it's like. It's all over in a minute. Everybody does it. Why try to be different? You were built for it, born for it. That's what it's for. You're a dope, Mahon. And I'm a dope. But I *know* I'm a dope, see? That's where we're different. You don't. I know there's something wrong with Meredith. Known it for days. Am I a doctor? A nurse? No. But I've got instinct. I know. You don't know. Stephano don't know. Maybe Broadbent suspects—but there it is plain, only I can't say what. Mahon—take his arms off him at night. Knock him out with a sleeper-deeper.

"No," Benny Frischling said, "there's nothing I want." He rolled over on his back. Mahon patted his pillow. "Good night." He lay still, listening to Meredith's even breathing and suddenly he got it—cold, like a flash of lightning. I'm a little guy; I'm a sailor. I can be an air navigator! Commercial ships—around the world, after. Telling them where they are, where they'll be next—holding the whole flight in the palm of my hand. Figuring it, knowing it. Rip Cord Benny Frischling. "Skipper. Eighteen minutes to Le Bourget." Le Bourget, Templehof, Maison Blanc, Heliopolis, Wellington, Ratmalana, Hickam and Hamilton Field. Hell—the whole world—all of it—and I can get it, too—and I will get it!

Miss Mahon crossed the Ward finally to Joe Keenan's bed, snapping out all but the one night light as she passed the wall switches by the passage entrance. She stood back from the bed, out of reach of his arms. He lay there watching her eyes, not moving. "Not friends any more, are we, Pat?" he said softly.

"Don't be silly now, Joe."

"All evening—you never came near me."

"I've been busy, Joe. We have two A.W.O.L.'s and we expect a convoy."

"Don't be that way," he said. "You could have come spoken to me. What's the matter, now? One day one thing, one day the other? You trying to fight yourself?"

"Maybe," she nodded.

"You weren't trying very hard two nights ago in the office."

"You mustn't come in there any more at night," she said. "People will start talking—"

"People will start talking," he chuckled. "Is that all you worry about? What are you, Pat—a grown woman or a child? One day one thing. One day the other. Think yourself out of this one. You want me to be touching you right now. You know I'm the guy, but you're afraid to admit it. Now listen—there's nobody in Room A. They were going to put Whitehead in there for a few days. In a couple of hours after they've all corked off, after the night supervisor checks the Ward, I'm going to the bathroom. Then I'm going into Room A. Be there—"

"I can't, Joe—"

"Listen. I'm nice to you. I don't do a thing you don't want me to do. I'm not the impatient type. Not crude. I know how you're like—what goes on inside you. And it'll be that way, see? Always. You can't get out of this, Pat. You're committed."

"Joe, I've got to go."

"You've got to go! You've always got to go. You don't dare come close to the bed. Your knees are melting now. You know I'm right. You know I'm the one for you—"

She turned away quickly, took two steps and then turned back, reached for his wheel chair and rolled it out of reach of his grasping hand, pushed it swiftly toward the passage. He lay there furious in the darkness, his hand out of bed, fist clenched. "*You little bitch—*"

"Go on, kiss her good night and we'll all go to sleep," Daley called to him.

"Daley—you little half-assed bastard—I'm going to slap your cheap face in all over some day."

Miss Charbonneau, the night supervisor, sat in the chief nurse's office, going over the paper work. It was her first night on and the thirty days of her tour of duty stretched out endlessly before her in a procession she could not see the end of. She'd done the job before and it looked now as if she'd always draw it as long as she stayed at the hospital. She was neat, Miss Charbonneau, and compact in a hundred and thirty-two pounds of competence and common horse sense.

In a few minutes she would start her rounds. Seven and a half miles of wards, on foot, in the silent corridors with the lights dim and life sleeping in great massed quietude throughout all the silent buildings that sprawled under the night sky. The telephone rang.

"Night supervisor. Lieutenant Charbonneau."

"Lootinant—this is Sergeant Wokowski. M.P.'s. About those two A.W.O.L.'s from Ward Twenty. Would they go into town?"

"It's the first I've heard of them. Who are they?"

"Schiappas and Paskow. What I mean is if they have friends in town—or even some money, they might take off fer town?"

"Perhaps you'd better call the Provost Marshal's office anyway."

"Yes. I guess I better. We've been all over the grounds and can't find them. I'll call the Provost Marshal."

The telephone rang.

"Night supervisor. Lieutenant Charbonneau."

"My boy Willie he's cailink me yastiddy from Halloran Hospital. How I shall gat him sant here? Trensfer?"

The telephone rang.

"Night suprvisor. Lieutenant Charbonneau."

"Is Mabel there? Can I speak to her?"

"Mabel who?"

"Just Mabel—the blonde kid."

"This is the hospital."

"The *hell* you say. What are you doing tonight yourself, Toots?"

"Sitting up with some sick friends."

The telephone rang.

"Night supervisor. Lieutenant Charbonneau."

"I want the Medical O.D. His phone doesn't answer. Can you check on him, Charbonneau? This is Krientz in Ward Two. I want him to look in on General Cranston as soon as he can."

"I'll try to locate him."

The telephone rang.

"Night supervisor. Lieutenant Charbonneau."

"MacGregor. The Trib. We've got a lead you've got that Medal of Honor guy from Aachen there."

"You want the Public Relations Officer. Extension seven four."

"Like hell, Sister. That guy knows from nothing. Ever. He's strictly dry run. Give. Have you or haven't you?"

Miss Charbonneau stood up and looked at the blowsy WAC clerk she had drawn. "Look. This is my course," and she picked up a pencil and stood in front of the floor plan on the wall. "I keep moving down this way clockwise through the floor. It brings the wards up in numerical rotation. See. Allow about an hour and fifteen minutes to each floor. It's nine-thirty now. If anything comes in on the phone that you can't handle, make a rough estimate of the elapsed time since I left—call a ward on the estimate and if I haven't arrived there, call the next ward back. If I've left—call the next ward ahead. For instance. If you want me at a quarter to eleven—that's an hour and a quarter from now—" Miss Charbonneau put the pencil point firmly on Ward Nine. "Call Ward Nine. Hold the wire on our call and call me on this phone. Get it?"

"All but clockwise. What's clockwise, Ma'am?"

Miss Charbonneau stared at her. "The way the hands of a clock go. Roughly, from left to right."

The WAC clerk looked at the clock. "Oh. Around?"
That way? I get it."

"Any trouble you can shoot yourself—shoot."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Miss Charbonneau took off. This was the payoff. This was it. Everything happens now. You start off calmly with an open mind and one by one you look in on the wards and every one is just like the last. Long and white and dimly lit, and full of sleeping men, with a nurse in the office, alert and watching the routine of it like a watch officer at sea. All of it quiet. All of it under control. All of it orderly. Then it happens. Everything. Seven and a half miles. Nine-thirty to one-thirty. Everything. Life and death and half-life. Everything. Every night.

"Hello, Lieutenant."

"Hello, Cassidy. Let's go." She'd only needed him once, when she didn't have him, so she always took him now. So did everybody since the razor fight. Cassidy was on permanent night duty. He didn't like the daytime. It gave him nothing. The night did. An old-time orderly. Thirty years Regular Army Medical Corps. "Didn't you ever want to be anything else, Cassidy?"

"Sure. Once. I tried. But I didn't make it. I wanted to be a sailor on the ferry boat that runs between Governor's Island and the Battery." He tagged along behind, soft footed and red handed, slightly stooped and foetid mouthed, with the stale quid in his cheek and his G.I. plates. "General Cranston ain't so well, they say. Great old fella, the General. 'Member him out in the Philippines. Years ago."

There was a leukemia in Ward Five. Going out. His family waiting. Charbonneau talked to the nurse. Old girl named Phipps. Tired and flat breasted. Rough handed and worn. Taking it all in her measured way as she had through all the long years since she was an apple-cheeked probationer. Death loitering in the corridor outside. The thin, steel breath of it waiting to blow in softly and take. Father. with a gold watch chain and a stubby

beard. Silent. Helpless. Just standing looking at nothing. Wife. Red eyed, waiting for the cloak of widowhood. Mother, sitting with a crumpled handkerchief, remembering. "Why do I have to wash the backs of my hands, Maw? I only eat with the *fronts*."

Charbonneau and Cassidy went on.

There was a girl on the stairs with a soldier. Standing there in the dark of the landing. Drawing away suddenly, the soldier fumbling awkwardly. They got her out, Charbonneau and Cassidy, and packed the soldier off. Cassidy saw it and stepped on it with his big foot. Standing there on it, thinking Charbonneau hadn't seen it. But she had and ignored it. Ignored Cassidy's dropping behind to get rid of it.

In Seven, they had the lung case, in a private room. Charbonneau looked in at it, listened to its in and out sighing, watching the sleeping face that stuck out of the end. Talked to the nurse, Fairbanks. Lovely Fairbanks with the golden hair and the soft skin and the mind of a rakehell inside her competent professional touch with everything. She never missed a trick, or a man. But never patients.

The WAC clerk got her on the phone in Ward Eight. "Lieutenant—the Airport called. There's a plane due in at ten forty-five with somebody aboard who's important. They wouldn't give the name. A lieutenant colonel, two majors, and a captain with him. They've notified General Mercato and he's gone out in his own car. We're to have an ambulance there and put up the rest of the party overnight if we can."

"Did they say he was a medical or a surgical case?"

"They didn't say."

"Then why didn't you ask?"

"I didn't think."

"All right. I'll take care of it." Charbonneau got the ambulance started off to the Airport and checked the officers' wards for vacancies and started setting up a private room and two doubles in Two. Ten-thirty now. "At eleven, Cassidy, we'll have to be in Receiving."

They checked Ward Nine. Ward Nine was where the corporal had hanged himself in the shower bath last week. It was quiet tonight. Dark heads on white pillows in long sleeping rows. One pillow vacant—waiting for the surgeons upstairs to finish an ileostomy—which was the last trick they could turn in desperate pursuit of a little more life—a few more weeks, a month or two—maybe a year.

The ambulance brought in Treadmore Basset from the Middle Eastern Commission, with the personal rank of Ambassador. A long, thin man, twisted with illness. The captain with him was a WAC captain, his secretary. That complicated it. The three other officers were members of the Lebanon Military Commission, flown back with Basset. General Mercato disrupted all the arrangements Miss Charbonneau had made. Made new ones himself. Show me a medical officer without a line officer's complex—especially a medical general and especially in the middle of the night. "Yes, General," Charbonneau said.

Her clerk got her again in Ward Twelve. It was just on to midnight. "There's a convoy, Lieutenant. Twenty-two cases. Air ambulance landing about one A.M. I notified Captain Desbro and he's meeting it. All surgical."

"Good girl. Hold on a minute." Charbonneau looked in her notebook. "Got a pencil? Take this. Ward Fifteen—eight. Ward Seventeen—twelve. Ward Twenty—two. Call the three wards, check to see if they have the vacant beds. Warn them of estimated time of arrival. Warn the Surgical O.D. if Captain Desbro hasn't. He may want to alert the stand-by surgical team. That's Operating Room D. Call Strahan and have it set up right away if the Surgical O.D. says to."

Ward Thirteen. She pushed the button outside the locked door. "You wait, Cassidy." A big M.P. sergeant came down the passage and put his face close to the heavy wire grill. "Who is it?"

"Lieutenant Charbonneau. Night supervisor."

"Yes, Ma'am." He whipped out his keys, opened the door for her and closed and locked it behind him. He

snapped his fingers loudly and another big M.P. got up from a chair at the Ward entrance and came down to them. "Night supervisor," the first M.P. said to him and he stepped over to Charbonneau's left. They went up to the nurse's office, unlocked the door, went in, and the M.P. locked it behind them.

Little Fitchett looked up from her desk. "Hello, Margaret. Got the Duty again?"

Charbonneau smiled. "Three times, and I get permanent possession. How's everything?"

"Quiet night," Fitchett grinned. "We had a singer for awhile, earlier. Mother Macree—and an orator. Ask the sergeant."

The M.P. sergeant grinned a rubber-lipped grin. "We sure did have an orator, Miss, I mean Lootenant. He told us all about the war. Just like a Congressman. It got going good and then all of a sudden it didn't make no sense either. We hadda wet pack him."

"I'll go through," Charbonneau said.

The sergeant got red in the face suddenly. "We got a foul mouth, Lootenant. I better warn you. He hardly ever sleeps. He's a peacherino. Bed Nine on the left. He's a spitter, too. He can spit in your eye at ten feet."

"Open up, we go through," Charbonneau said.

"Need me?" Fitchett asked her.

"No. When are you getting married?"

"Oh, sometime," Fitchett said airily. "I'm in no hurry. I can bide my time!"

The M.P. sergeant unlocked the ward door, let her through, and locked the door behind them. He and the other M.P. ranged on either side of her, towering above her, their eyes sweeping the beds now, watching for anything—everything.

Ward Thirteen. Men who had gone so far that they couldn't come back—gone out into the outer reaches of the mind, limping across the reefs into the vast, lone waters where the lights are false and fixed and buoy bells no longer echo in the fog. Some of them could be brought back eventually by skillful pilotage. Some of them

would be adrift forever. Sweat on faces, sleeping with the lights on them. Faces calm in sleep, worried still in sleep, placid, resigned and twisted. Oblivious. Each one sick in mind as one can be sick in body. Each one a ramification, a distortion, an exaggeration that was uniquely personal. Each one disoriented in his escape out of the harbor on his own uncharted course, drifting with no hand on the helm, dependent on outside forces now for damage control.

It was quiet, Ward Thirteen, except for the sound of Miss Charbonneau's light footsteps—of the footsteps of the M.P.'s.

"*You whore!*" screamed suddenly from Number Nine bed.

"Quiet, Charlie." The big M.P. sergeant darted down the ward. "You remember me. I'm your friend Butch. Don't be talking like that."

"She's a whore—a stinking whore!"

"Charlie, Charlie—take it easy, Charlie. You'll wake everybody up."

The man in the bed looked up at him with round, childish eyes. "*A whore,*" he said.

"Charlie, be good now."

Miss Charbonneau watched the man for a moment while Butch talked him quiet. Such a thin line—such a frail partition. They tear it, slip through—and steel doors slam behind them.

"A whore—" whispered confidentially.

"O.K., Charlie. Quiet now." Butch slipped back to her and they went on. He unlocked and locked the doors after her. Took her to the end of the passage, unlocked again and let her out to her watchdog Cassidy. "Good night, Lootenant."

They went downstairs and out into the open air at the ambulance entrance. Just time to cross over and do the Women's Wing before the convoy rolled in. Miss Charbonneau stood for a moment looking up into the night sky. Somewhere up there at two hundred miles an hour was a great ambulance plane winging back from the wars.

Gray-green, its four powerful engines grinding down the flung oceanic miles. Stacks red at the lips around the blue fury of the exhausts. Alone in its power against the great distances of the world, shrinking them down into hours. Twenty-four hours from combat. "I was in Germany yesterday." Or the other way. "What day is today? Wait a minute—Saturday? That's right. I had breakfast at Tarawa Wednesday. We had two Wednesdays this week! How do you like that? I wonder do you get per diem for two Wednesdays?"

Miss Charbonneau breathed deeply of the night air, raising her arms. Someone had been sick at the entrance. Cassidy had a mop to it and a pail of water, cutting down its pungent bitterness. "Damn drunks."

And there they'd be, inside that plane. Twenty-two of them, tortured in their youth by war. Badly hit and only a few days out of it. Shock gone and the pain dulled from sharp, thawed-out agony to a deep persistence that was worse. Minds still back in it, clouded ever since by unconsciousness and sedatives—leaping back suddenly—"Where's Lieutenant McClelland—hey, you—where am I? I've got to find Lieutenant McClelland!"

"Take it easy, Soldier."

"What outfit are you? *Hey, Chum, where the hell are we?* We were in a plane I remember. Damn it all—the States? What do you know? Sure—just two days ago we crossed the Moselle—"

Cassidy had the walk clean. He took the broom and pail back and came out again. They crossed to the Women's Wing and went in and up the stairs. Maternity. All quiet. My God, is there anything we don't handle here? "Crossley—how's that colored baby without the eyeballs?"

"He seems all right except for that. Eats and sleeps well. Putting on weight."

Old "Falstaff" Crossley, fat and homely and enthusiastic after years of it. "The crop was ten today between noon and seven o'clock and probably two more before

dawn. Mass production, Charbonneau. Mass production. Let me tell you one. Two young Army wives here—veddy, veddy West Point—and one says to the other, 'My goodness, you're large. I believe you're going to have twins.' The other one says, 'Well, there are none in either family as far as I know. You only have them once in a hundred thousand times.' 'Gracious!' the first one says. 'When do you get any time to do your housework?'"

The telephone rang and Crossley stepped to it.

"You told me that, Crossley—*three months ago.*"

"For you, Spoil Sport." Crossley held out the phone. It was the WAC clerk. "Ma'am. General Cranston just died. I thought you'd want to know."

"Thank you. Anything else? All right. I'll be in Reception next. The convoy's due."

She told Cassidy.

"Gosh," he said, "that's too bad. A fine old gentleman. A real soldier. I remember him in the Philippines. He dates back to Indian fighting days. Did you know that, Lieutenant?"

"No."

"Yep. He was a second lieutenant way back in seventy something or the early eighties. He had the Indian campaign medals. A place called Crazy Woman Creek, he got an arrow. A real old-timer. He had the Seventh, one time. He always said he'd rather be Colonel of the Seventh than Jesus Christ, if he had his choice and he thought he had, because he only had one miracle on his record and that was staying in the Army after he'd dropped a three-inch field piece through the bottom of a transport. I got a picture of him somewhere—when he was a lieutenant out at Wallawalla. Little blue fatigue cap, like the Civil War, cocked on his curly blond hair. Twinkle in his eye. Gosh. Funny how a man gets old and the world goes on without him. Eighty-seven years." Cassidy chuckled. "Well, I'm no spring chicken myself any more, Lootenant. I guess we all go the same road."

"I guess we do," Miss Charbonneau said. "Here comes

the convoy. Call up and see if the M.P.'s have located those two boys from Ward Twenty, will you, Cassidy. Paskow and Schiappas."

The two new men they put in Ward Twenty from the convoy were Atkinson and Stroup, four days out of the fighting in Germany. The heavy motor vibration of the last eighteen hours was still a strong echo in their bodies and their minds cleared slowly to the distance they had come. They were clean now and the realization of that was something to grovel in, something to lie quietly in as you lie in bed on Sunday morning. Beyond that and the subconscious knowledge that they were badly hurt, there was very little that touched their minds. They lay still in the thin skeins of haze that had clouded their minds ever since, with no curiosity groping through it yet.

They took them up in the elevators. White enameled operating-room trucks swathed in Medical Corps blankets, rolled them down the silent, dimly-lit corridors, rolled them into the darkened Ward. Miss Mahon and the orderlies shifted them from the trucks to their beds. Atkinson next to Daley. Stroup between Keenan and Halpern.

Keenan woke up and lay there listening, not moving. He saw Mahon between the two beds but there was a medical officer there, too, and another nurse, so he didn't reach out and touch her. They stepped up to the office, and the head on the pillow moved slightly, turned toward him.

"Say, Bud. How's a guy get a bottle—I got to squirt."

"I'll get you one." Keenan reached for his button, pressed it until it clicked. The tiny red light went on at the head of his bed and traced the bridge of his nose, his cheek, and the curve of his chin—outlined it in a thin red line against the darkness and the white of his pillow. "Where you from?"

Stroup thought a minute. "Damned if I *rightly* know," he said. "How do you ever tell in the Army? Awhile back we were moving into a place called Thionville north of Metz. At least that's what they told me. The lieutenant

got killed with the map—then the God-damned B 2's over—" his voice trailed off.

"What the hell are B 2's?"

"Be too bad if they aren't friendly. They weren't."

Miss Mahon came in and snapped off the call light.

"What is it, Joe?"

"Not me. I rang for the new guy. He wants a bottle. How you doing?"

"I'm doing all right." She crossed to the other bed. "Just a minute," she said and went back to the passage, to the washroom, and came back again with the towel-covered bottle. Then again she went back into the office. Keenan lay there listening. He could hear Mahon's voice and the Surgical O.D.'s voice and that other nurse, they called her Charbonneau. Carbon water. What a hell of a language, French. And he could hear Daley's voice across the Ward, talking to the other new man. Daley said, "The hell you say—I just read about that in the papers."

"Read all you want, Bub—but don't tell me. I was there, I know."

"But Geez—it was only a couple of days ago, how the hell?"

"I wouldn't know. That's all she wrote."

"All *who* wrote."

"She didn't say."

"Say—are you delirious?"

"Never felt better in my life," Atkinson said.

"Well you're not making sense. I been there, too. First wave D-Day. Omaha Easy Red!"

"What war was that?"

"*What war was that!* I bet they got you ashore by a gangplank."

"I'll tell you what," Atkinson said, "whyn't you wait till it gets light. Then you can show me the medals."

"Aw hell—"

"Look," Atkinson said, "I didn't come here to talk. After what happened to me, I need all the beauty sleep I can get. Whyn't you read a good book now and leave me be? That's a good boy, Omaha Easy Red."

Miss Mahon came back to Stroup's bed and took the bottle away. She came back again and gave him a shot. Then she gave Atkinson a shot. Good needle technique, Mahon's, better than most Docs'. Easy and gentle.

Miss Charbonneau said good night and went on with her rounds with Cassidy. The Surgical O.D. went down the stairs. Miss Mahon stood alone in the passage, looking down the long, darkened aisle between the beds of Ward Twenty. It was almost two o'clock, the slack hour when the mind went blank and you just sat and waited for three, four, five—and the new day. Atkinson and Stroup weren't the war to her—she couldn't feel its long tentacles reaching through them down the night skies to Ward Twenty. They are just more routine. More job. She couldn't see it as Captain Broadbent saw it always—the whole world of war ringed out at a great distance—a far horizon to all the Ward Twenties in the world. A horizon of fire and the pungency of old death—agony and the white douche of shock. Filth and fear and the stark and headlong persistence of men who have torn a thousand years of civilization from their souls and stood naked in the quick of their primitive heritage. *"Yes you will, you bastardly son of a bitch—"*

And then a 155 screams over the Valley of the Aino, a Nambu chatters from a tree top on the Irrawaddy, a knee mortar shell strikes into bamboo on Kwajalein, five hundred pounds of death arch through the torn sky over Stolberg—and whoever doesn't hear them, whoever lives—comes back across that thousand years in a few days, a few weeks.

And there they are in Ward Twenty. There are records that state their histories. There is surgery and medication and therapy and rest and diet and care—and time. That heals the body. But what clothes the spirit again, the stripped soul that has stood naked in the mud of slaughter and screamed defiance across open sights into the teeth of the Prince of Darkness? Who pays that bill?

The Ward was quiet, but Miss Mahon knew that Joe Keenan was still awake. Just lying there thinking in the darkness. And she knew what it was he was thinking of. But she had all of that under control within herself. There'd be no more of it—ever. They'd been talking about it again in the Nurses' Mess tonight. Two of the older ones, two captains who'd been twenty years getting their railroad tracks. Nurses and patients. They'd been talking about Ethel Fairbanks, that blonde girl in Ward Seven. They'd seen her at the Hotel Forsberg with a patient. Well, they wouldn't talk about *her*. It was all too silly. Men had never bothered Mahon before, because her mother had built a crude wall between her and men, ever since she was a little girl—thrown it up harshly out of the rocks and steel and mortar of disgust and fear. Men did things to you and you were ruined. Men touched you and you were disgraced. Men only wanted one thing from women, even if they married them. Men were beasts, sinful and lewd and brutal. Decent women always guarded themselves against their threatening lust. Of course there was marriage. There had to be that, for children. But you could avoid that, too, if you wanted to, by just living your own life, and your own life was better, for a man was there in marriage, too. And you had to submit to his disgusting desires.

So Mahon was twenty-nine before she met Joe Keenan, before she knew that beastliness was in women too—to betray them as it had almost betrayed her—and *that it wasn't beastliness at all*. A traitor lurking sweetly within her, leering at her, waiting the chance to sell her out. Maybe mother was wrong. You want Joe to do exactly what he wants to do. He'll never love you, he'll never marry you. You haven't the guile to make him, you haven't the cleverness of other women. You've waited too long for that, in the shell you've made for yourself. You've lost the gift that is intrinsic with early youth. You're a falsity—a grown woman who isn't a woman. A great big stupid girl hunk, with a wall closed inside of

you, barring out life, not living it as female animals should live it. Letting it pass you by. His eyes tell you that and the touch of his hands. The sound of his voice when he talks to you.

"Stop this!" she whispered fiercely to herself. And after a moment, she drew a deep breath and stepped into the Ward. For a moment she stood quite still, just inside the double doors, listening. There was no movement. No sound except the concert breathing of sleeping men and the faint rattle of curtain rings against a chromium bar, as the night wind caressed the still air.

She stood at the foot of Frischling's bed. Dark Frischling with his delicate Carthaginian nose turned sideways to the pillow, his tight-ringed black hair, damp to his head in sleep. Frischling the Pirate—he should have had a large gold ring in his ear, a dirk between his strong white teeth.

Meredith next to him, asleep too, pale in sleep with his weakness lying slack on his face like a damp veil covering it. Always running, escaping—from duty to his family, from damaged girls, from town to town, hotel job to hotel job. A famished mouse, escaping in the back alleys of life, snatching what he could for his quivering stomach—running on, escaping as he'd tried to escape from combat when it had suddenly caught him on the St. Loperiers Road—in the sunlight. Screaming, whimpering when he was caught. Quaking inside. Laughing to cover his next quick plan of escape.

She stepped down softly to Meneilley's bed. He lay flat on his back, his mouth open, snoring, completely relaxed, out of it—gathering his strength to face it again as he'd gathered it always in sleep. He could do that so easily for he was honest animal, inside and out. When he was tired, he slept. When he was hungry, he ate. There was no border line of doubt and worry for him to cross, just the door to his desires to snatch open and slam shut.

Little Daley lay all curled into himself, his spine curved,

thighs and arms up, head bent downward. A womboid, not wanting the world and the world knowing it. Clutching it now arrogantly with the inalienable right that shell splinters had bestowed upon him, throwing its dislike back into its teeth forevermore. Is that so? Well, I was there, see? I know.

The new man, Atkinson, stolid and flat in induced sleep. Oblivious still to what the world had in store for him when he finally came out of it enough to take stock.

Cancellare, his chubby boy's hands flat on the pillow, his little round face not a part of all this—living far beyond it in a vague, delicious dream that he couldn't quite understand. Knowing that it was all right if he never understood it, but just kept on feeling it, a nerve twinge in the pit of his stomach that brought ecstatic tears to his eyes.

Mahon turned back. Paskow and Schiappas still not located. Gone off somewhere, daring whatever consequences there might be. Exempt from consequences.

Milton Halpern. She stepped close to Milton and listened to his breathing. Milton was asleep. He lay awake mostly at night and slept in the daytime. She had sat with him and talked to him in whispers, but not tonight. He was asleep, easily asleep, lying there with his lips and the muscles of his face slack. Not knowing any of it now except the sweet oblivion that held him in its pleasant arms.

Stroup, lying as Atkinson was lying, knocked out flat by his shot. Sprawled in unknowing and unknowing of it.

She stood at the foot of Joe Keenan's bed. Asleep, too. She stood there for a long time, looking at his face—the relaxed strength of it. His straight nose and the warm curve of his lips. The blue shadow of his beard dusting the flat planes of his cheeks. She dominated him now, standing there watching him in sleep. All the strength he had was gone from him. He was harmless now and her fear of him was gone. Funny how that was, very deep inside of her. He was her child now, born without travail. She possessed him completely, without being possessed.

This was the way and she had done it finally. This was the groping of all men's minds—a vicarious parthenogenesis—and all women's.

Then he smiled, without moving, and he whispered, "Hello, Pat," and all the strength ran out of her legs and her hands were icy. "I thought you'd come back."

She swallowed to open her throat. "Are you all right, Joe?"

"No—I'm not all right. You took my chair away. Either bring it back or bring me a bottle, too."

"If I bring the chair, will you be good? Will you go back to bed?"

"If you want me to."

"I want you to, Joe."

"All right. That's plain enough I guess."

She brought the chair in from the passageway and stood there beside it for a minute, to prove to herself that she could, even if he touched her. But he didn't touch her. He got into the chair and rolled it out into the passage and up to the washroom.

Mahon stepped primly back into her office and stood for a moment in front of the locked medicine cabinet, fingered the keys in her skirt pocket. There was so little left to do now until it was time to make the early round with morning medication. She had two letters to write. The night supervisor had made her rounds. Of course they might bring Schiappas and Paskow in before morning but they had probably gone off to town and wouldn't turn up until tomorrow. Two-thirty by the clock in the office. The slow night minutes purred in the wheels behind the white clock face. Someone coughed in his sleep far down the Ward. Water was running in the washroom. It stopped and she heard the door open and the light click off, heard the soft whisper of Joe's rubber tires coming back down the passage. The whisper stopped at the office door. She turned and looked at him. His eyes were troubled. "Can I come in for a cigarette, Pat?—I don't seem able to sleep."

She shrugged. "If you want to."

He held out his case to her. "Nobody'll come now. Sneak one."

She shook her head. "I've stopped. Completely. Really I have. I haven't smoked in a week."

"Strong mind," he said. He lit his and breathed the blue streamers of smoke from his nostrils. "Pat," he said, "I guess I've been pretty much of a louse. I'm sorry." He held the cigarette straight up between his fingers and frowned at the lighted tip, at the smoke skeins that writhed upward from it and rippled in the air above. "I've been around too much, I guess. At first I didn't believe you hadn't. I thought you were handing me a line. But I know now that you weren't. That's why I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't worry, Joe," she smiled. "It's all right."

"Yea—but that's not the point, quite. The point is that I had no right to do it—to be as fresh as I was. To talk as plain. To—paw you."

"Well, let's not talk about it any more. Let's just forget it."

"I can't very well," he said. "You're a decent girl, see? I know I've got an attraction for you—sort of chemistry maybe—that you can't help feeling. I don't mean me, necessarily. I mean some man will always have that for some woman. It's the law of the world. Well, I knew you had it from the first time we talked. I could sort of feel it between us. You couldn't help having it—but I could help trying to take advantage of it."

"Joe—look—you don't have to tell me all this. Nothing's happened, there's no damage done."

"But I have to tell you how I feel, because I don't want you to think I'm just a plain heel who doesn't care what people think."

"I don't, Joe. I—I like you too much to think that, I guess. I mean—as a man, as a friend."

He nodded. "And I like you, Pat. I guess you're about the only straight girl I ever met in my life. And I want to stay friends with you. That's why I had to tell you."

Suddenly she wanted to touch him, to kneel down be-

side him and put her arms around him. To hold him close, to feel him.

He closed his eyes tightly for a second as if to shut out some memory. Then he shook his head and smiled. "I've lived a lousy life, Pat. I guess I deserve what I got." He punched out his cigarette viciously. "It's like that with some men. They don't give a damn—until it's too late."

"Don't feel like that, Joe. Don't say things like that."

"Why not? If they're true?"

"They're not true—you're a decent guy."

He laughed. "O.K. Well, I told you. Friends then?" and he held out his hand for hers.

"Friends," she said and took it. He sat there feeling the warmth of her palm and finger tips against his, looking straight into her eyes until what he knew would happen, happened. Until her eyes wavered from his as they always did.

"You've got to go now, Joe."

"No I don't." He pulled her toward him, reached for her with his other hand.

"Don't, Joe—please. We've talked all this—"

"You've got no right to do this to me, Pat—no right! I want to be decent. You won't let me. Stay still, don't pull away. It only makes it worse if you try to get away. I won't touch you. Just stay still a minute and I'll let you go."

He had her across the chair arms, in his lap, held close. He held her closer, not moving against her, just holding her tight and firm in fierce possession.

"Let me go now," she whispered.

"You don't want me to."

"You've got to, Joe!"

"Who says so? You don't. You want me to hold onto you this way until you can't breathe—until you can't think or—"

"Don't, Joe—please don't—" She twisted frantically, fighting him with her hands, with her knees.

"Pat—listen to me—you little fool—this has got to be—"

"Somebody'il come, Joe—*please*—"

"Nobody'll come. It's late. Listen to me." His voice was hoarse. "Come into the next room—"

"No—"

"Do you hear me—" He held her face and pressed his lips to hers and there was flame in her, crackling, blinding flame. She groped for his shoulders. He was moving the chair, turning it—wheeling it out with one hand, holding her with the other. It jammed in the doorway. He freed it, rolled it on fiercely, sprinted it in the passageway and into the darkness of Room A. The bed was a ghost bed with the steel line of its chromium bar above it. The window was blue dark against the light.

"Joe—I'm not going to."

"This time you are." He was breathless. Steel arms in the darkness.

She tore away from him with sudden strength, going back against the wall, her hands flat against its cool smoothness, gasping. "I love you, Joe—but I can't—I can't."

"Come here." He was out of the chair. On the bed somehow.

"No, Joe."

"Come here, Pat."

She took a deep breath. Stood free of the wall. "Joe—do you love me?"

"Of course I love you, you fool."

"Will you marry me, Joe?"

"Of course I'll marry you—"

"You're lying, Joe."

"You'll never know," he said, "until you find out. You'll never find out, until you do— Are you coming here?"

An end table crashed over in the Ward, crashed its steel bulk and a glass went with it, splintering in fragmented laughter. Frischling shouted hoarsely, "*Hey, somebody, quick!*" Then everybody was calling and the reading lights were pulled on all down the Ward when Mahon ran in. Meredith was on the floor, thrashing his

prosthesis impotently at Frischling's head. Benny had him down flat where he'd pinned him as soon as he'd leapt at him and hauled him out of bed. Bill Meredith's right pajama leg was soaked in blood and there was blood on his torn-out bed, blood smearing the sheets and blankets. "Come on, Mahon, for God's sake tourniquet him. He's cut the big artery in his leg with a razor blade!"

She went down on one knee, tearing away the pajama leg at the top, sinking her strong thumb into the femoral artery above the gash. "Hold him, Benny. I've got it. Hold him still!"

"I got him. Don't worry. He's about out."

"No—I'm not—you son of a bitch. I'll kill you—for this! I'll kill you!"

Joe Keenan was in his chair right behind.

"What th' hell?"

"Call the Surgical O.D." Mahon's voice was sharp. She ran a hand through her disordered hair, streaking it with blood, dabbing her cheek. "If you can't get him, get the night supervisor's office and ask her to get him. Get *some* doctor—"

Meredith was thrashing his head from side to side, trying to thrash his legs, but Mahon had them now, clamped between hers, clinging to him, her thumb deep in the flesh of his thigh, closing off the artery.

"What gives? What gives?" They were yelling up and down the Ward. More lights went on. "Shut up. Something's happened. Somebody's hurt!"

"It's all right, Lugs," Keenan rolled back into the Ward. "Pipe down. It's under control."

"Did you get him?" Pat asked.

"On his way."

Frischling said, "It's just luck, Miss Mahon. I don't know how I got onto it. It's sort of a half dream still. He was fooling with the razor off and on all day while he was practising picking up and putting down. Then I seemed to have dreamed he was cutting himself. Or maybe I half woke up and saw him, only under the covers and all, I don't see how. Maybe I smelt the blood. But

I knew. It's in a who-done-it book we read—the big artery in the leg. You go out almost as fast as you cut ya throat—so I leapt for him and pulled him outa bed—and yelled—”

Meredith lay still under them. “*I hadda right!* I don’t have to put up with what I got. I don’t have to put up with anything I don’t want. It’s a free country. I’m an American. I can do as I please. Leave me alone—you can’t stop me. *I’ll do it again—*”

“Shut up, Bill,” Benny said. “Ya nuts. Don’t get nuts-ier.”

“You bastard—who set you to look after me?”

“Don’t talk like that, Bill. You got no right to cut yourself. The minute you take the right, everybody’s got the right to stop you, see? Ain’t that right, Miss Mahon?”

“Don’t talk. I’ve got it stopped, I think. See if the O.D.’s coming, Joe.”

“Go ahead,” Meredith said. “Send me away. Send me to Ward Thirteen! I’ll do it again first chance I get—but I’ll get back here and kill you first, Frischling!”

“Shut up, Bill. Don’t talk that way. Get a grip on yourself. You let go. You were too happy all the time. You should have relaxed and got depressed, too. Up and down. That’s life—not this—”

“How do you know? You got hands.”

“You got feet,” Frischling said. “Take it easy, Joe,” he said to Keenan. “Hang onto him for awhile. I hurt my left leg hitting the floor.” Keenan let himself down out of his chair, crawled past Pat Mahon with no feeling for her left in him and took hold of Meredith’s shoulders, straddled him as Frischling climbed off. “Watch the hooks, that’s all, Joe,” Benny said. “I knew they shouldn’t let him sleep in them. Gee, Mahon—you’re a darb—”

She looked down at her skirt. It was soaked with blood. A fierce pride surged in her breasts and she straightened her thin shoulders, waiting for the O.D. to come—quite alone in her shocking symbolism, oblivious of Keenan now as he was of her.

Miss Charbonneau and Cassidy finished the last of the wards and went down in the back elevator to the ground floor. They walked down past the closed laboratory, out under the late stars where the night air was freshening for the dawn and in again at the old ambulance entrance. They turned to go up the stairs and stopped suddenly. Twenty yards up the passageway there was the door to the Morgue and the sound of cautious voices.

"Slockt, Schiap."

"*Spicious basserds*. Who lockit?"

"Genmercato proolly."

"Whos gonna get outa morgue? *Whasidear*? *Spicious basserds*."

Cassidy and Miss Charbonneau walked up to them.

"Hey, Paskow! Company. We got company." Schiappas pointed.

"By damn. If it ain't ol' Cassidy. My ol' college chum. Ol' Cat's Eye Cassidy. Holy hell, Cassidy, why ain't you in bed—an ol' man like you? You'll stunt y' growth."

"I know. Don't tell me," Miss Charbonneau said. "Let me guess. Schiappas and Paskow? Ward Twenty?"

"Brigirl," Paskow said. "You gotta key?"

"The key to what?"

"T'd'morgue, d'morgue!"

"Is there someone in there?"

"S'full!" Schiappas said. "S'always full. Ya heard of practissin' medicine? Well practiss makes perfec."

Paskow said, "Ol' Charlie Whitehead. Tellim g'night. We gotta tellim g'night. He almos' gotta Heart. *Greakid*, Charlie. *Greakid*."

"Don't you think it's about time we told everybody good night?" Charbonneau said. "Just to say we did? It's four o'clock."

"*Swellidear*. Les go. All over hospill. Tell evbody g'night."

"No," Miss Charbonneau said. "Just a few select friends. You two and Cassidy and me."

Cassidy took a firm grip on the back of Schiappas' chair

and started the uphill push to the forward elevators. Miss Charbonneau bent her slight body to Paskow's chair.

"Hey, *whasidear*? Where's Schiap? Schiap an' I gotta date."

"You've had it," Charbonneau said quietly.

"Smart tomato," Paskow nodded. "How d'you know all these things?"

Schiappas yelled, "Hey, Pas."

"Shut up," Cassidy hissed. "The both of youse. People are asleep." And he kept them quiet until the elevator was almost up to their floor. They sat there in their chairs, blinking stupidly in the bright light, their heads loose on their shoulders, rolling. Then suddenly Schiappas threw back his head, eyes closed, and bellowed at the top of his voice—

"Oh there'll *be* no *promoshun*—

This *side* of the oshun

So cheer up m'lads fah *kumall!*"

THE END

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